



Research Article

Marta Faustino*

On the “How” and the “Why”: Nietzsche on Happiness and the Meaningful Life

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2024-0033>

received April 11, 2024; accepted August 13, 2024

Abstract: Nietzsche is commonly interpreted as strongly rejecting and even despising any possible conception (or pursuit) of happiness. And yet, one of the most pervasive topics in Nietzsche’s work is the problem of human suffering, the pursuit of meaning (or purpose) in life, and the possibility of a joyful or affirmative disposition toward existence. In this article, I argue that Nietzsche’s criticism of common conceptions of happiness should be seen as a redefinition, rather than a rejection, of the notion of human happiness, with important implications for contemporary discussions on the topic. I start by addressing three of the main contemporary theories of happiness from a Nietzschean perspective, underlining both the points of convergence and the points of divergence between Nietzsche and each of these accounts. I then gather the conclusions of the previous section, add Nietzsche’s positive claims on happiness and the meaningful life, and sketch what might be called a Nietzschean theory of happiness. Finally, I situate Nietzsche’s position in the contemporary debate on the topic and outline what I take to be his most important contributions to current discussions on happiness, meaning, and well-being in human life.

Keywords: happiness, well-being, human flourishing, meaning, affirmation of life

“People don’t strive for happiness, only the English do.”
Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Arrows and Epigrams,” §12¹

1 Introduction

Nietzsche is commonly interpreted as strongly rejecting and even despising any possible conception (or pursuit) of happiness. His biography is known to be full of suffering, sickness, pain, and solitude, and thus, he is not the first philosopher to come to mind when it comes to defining or discussing happiness. Unsurprisingly, the topic of happiness in Nietzsche’s thought is largely overlooked by most Nietzsche scholars,² while preferred attention is often given to alternative notions such as *Heiterkeit* and *Fröhlichkeit* (cheerfulness, joy, and

¹ References to Nietzsche’s works use numbers of aphorisms rather than page numbers. The translations used are listed in the bibliography. For posthumous fragments I have used the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA), indicating the number of the volume and the number of the fragment. When a posthumous fragment is quoted, I have used Walter Kaufmann’s translation in *The Will to Power*, indicating the corresponding fragment preceded by WP.

² Notable exceptions include Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 257–83; Schacht, *Nietzsche*; Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness;” Reginster, “Nietzsche’s New Happiness;” Wienand, “Discourses on Happiness;” Stegmaier, “Glück bei Nietzsche;” Urstad, “Nietzsche and Callicles;” Roos, “A Nietzschean Account;” Rempel, “Nietzsche and the ‘Happiness of Repose;” Turner, “Nietzsche and Happiness.”

* **Corresponding author: Marta Faustino**, IFILNOVA (Nova Institute of Philosophy) / NOVA-FCSH, Lisbon, Portugal,
e-mail: msffaustino@gmail.com

serenity).³ And yet, the concept of *Glück* (happiness) appears more than a thousand times in Nietzsche's work, and there is no published book by Nietzsche that does not deal with the notion in one way or another. While the importance of a given concept in Nietzsche's work should not be evaluated through merely quantitative methods, the prevalence of the notion in Nietzsche's corpus at least suggests that perhaps not enough attention has been given to this particular topic in Nietzsche's thought.

In fact, one of the most pervasive themes in Nietzsche's work is the problem of human suffering, the pursuit of meaning (or purpose) in life, and the possibility of a joyful or affirmative disposition toward existence. Thus, despite his general suspicion of classic definitions of happiness, I will try to show that Nietzsche's criticism of common conceptions of happiness should be seen as a complexification, rather than a rejection, of the very notion of human happiness. Like in several other crucial notions in his work, Nietzsche revalues and redefines the concept and presents an *alternative* notion of happiness ("his" notion), which is built by way of contrast with the most common assumptions on the matter, adding *nuances* that may have important implications for contemporary discussions on the topic.⁴ To make this clear, I will first address three of the main contemporary theories of happiness from a Nietzschean perspective, trying to underline both the points of convergence and the points of divergence between Nietzsche and each one of these accounts. I will follow the standard tripartition of contemporary theories of happiness and well-being and focus on ethical hedonism, the theory of desire satisfaction, and objective list theories.⁵ I will then gather the conclusions of the previous section, add Nietzsche's positive claims on happiness and the meaningful life, and sketch what might be called a Nietzschean theory of happiness. Finally, I will situate Nietzsche's position in the contemporary debate on the topic and outline what I take to be his most important contributions to current discussions on happiness, meaning, and well-being in human life.

2 Nietzsche and Contemporary Theories of Happiness

One of the best ways to try to make sense of Nietzsche and the problem of human happiness is to address Nietzsche's criticisms of *certain ways* of understanding happiness. This is a procedure that Nietzsche himself has used throughout his work, where most of "his" concepts are defined through opposition to other widespread ways of understanding the same concepts. While Nietzsche's views on happiness have been contrasted with classic theories of happiness – especially ancient accounts of happiness, hedonism, and utilitarianism⁶ –, little work has been done to relate Nietzsche to contemporary theories on the topic. Considering the fertility of this dialogue and the actuality of some of Nietzsche's criticisms and insights on the matter, that will be the focus of this article.

³ On Nietzsche's notions of *Heiterkeit* and *Fröhlichkeit*, see e.g. Wirth, "Nietzsches Fröhlichkeit;" Ansell-Pearson, "Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing;" Anderson and Christy, "What is 'The Meaning of Our Cheerfulness?';" Campioni, "'Gaya scienza' und 'gai saber' in Nietzsches Philosophie;" Ansell-Pearson and Serini, "Friedrich Nietzsche;" Kirkland and McNeal, *Joy and Laughter in Nietzsche's Philosophy*. It must be noted that *Heiterkeit*, *Fröhlichkeit* and *Glück* are difficult to translate and distinguish in the English language, and are for this reason often treated interchangeably. *Glück* is particularly challenging to translate, especially in the context of Nietzsche's work, given the broad range of meanings and connotations of the word in German. Additionally, Nietzsche often uses it to criticize conventional notions of happiness in the context of his critique of traditional morality, which might hinder the unveiling of Nietzsche's own positive notion of happiness. In this article, I am committed to showing that Nietzsche develops his own concept of *Glück*, which I suggest should be translated as human flourishing instead (Section 3).

⁴ As Walter Kaufmann notes, "Nietzsche himself, while not a hedonist, was a proponent of what one might call the Good Life" (Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 258). See also Turner, "Nietzsche and Happiness," 481–2. On Nietzsche and the art of living, see Götde et al., *Nietzsche on the Art of Living*.

⁵ As Guy Fletcher notes, "it has long been standard to divide theories of well-being in a tripartite way thus: Hedonism, Desire-fulfillment, Objective list" (Fletcher, "Objective List Theories," 149). See also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 493.

⁶ See Bett, "Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness;" Reginster, "Nietzsche's New Happiness;" Wienand, "Discourses on Happiness;" Stegmaier, "Glück bei Nietzsche;" Urstad, "Nietzsche and Callicles;" Roos, "A Nietzschean Account;" Rempel, "Nietzsche and the 'Happiness of Repose';" Turner, "Nietzsche and Happiness."

For the sake of economy, I have chosen to contrast Nietzsche's views on happiness with three conflicting contemporary theories of happiness: ethical hedonism, the theory of desire satisfaction, and objective list theories. While these theories are far from exhausting all the trends in contemporary discussions on happiness and well-being,⁷ they reflect the standard tripartition of these theories into "Hedonism, Desire-fulfillment, Objective list"⁸ and are thus representative of the main trends in this debate. As such, they were strategically chosen for two main reasons. First, their main arguments are, in their diversity, particularly apt to evidence both the elements that Nietzsche most vehemently rejects and the elements he endorses in his own notion of happiness. Second, given their popularity and relevance in current discussions on the topic, they are also particularly useful to infer Nietzsche's most important contributions to this ongoing debate.

Even though Nietzsche was obviously unfamiliar with contemporary theories of happiness, some of these accounts share similarities with preceding ones of which Nietzsche was well aware – and where this is not the case it is not difficult to infer what Nietzsche's stance toward their fundamental claims would be. While Nietzsche's historical, cultural, and philosophical landscape was significantly different from ours – thus making this endeavor particularly challenging – both Nietzsche and contemporary theories explore questions such as the nature, sources, and meaning of happiness, as well as its fundamental components and pathways to achieve it, thus making this dialogue particularly interesting and useful, not only for understanding the subtleties of Nietzsche's views on the topic, but also as a tool for critical reflection on contemporary widespread assumptions regarding happiness and well-being.

2.1 Ethical Hedonism

Let us start with ethical hedonism, a theory that Nietzsche knew well, both in the form of ancient Epicureanism and in the form of modern utilitarianism. As is well known, hedonism holds that pleasure (*hedonē*) is the highest good in human life and, correlatively, that pain is the highest evil. Even though hedonism can also be approached from a descriptive perspective – the idea that all human beings *naturally* seek pleasure and avoid pain, a thesis endorsed by psychological or motivational hedonism – in this article, I will be especially concerned with normative or ethical hedonism, that is, the claim that human beings *should* seek pleasure and avoid pain, or in other words, that pleasure is the only good with intrinsic value, which is why it *should be* the sole motivator of human action.⁹ In the context of hedonism, the goodness of an action is thus defined according to its potential to increase pleasure and/or decrease pain, pleasure, and pain being the sole appropriate criteria for deciding or determining a given course of action. Even though hedonists generally agree that an action is right if it increases (or at least contributes to) pleasure, they diverge on the question of whose pleasure should be sought. On this basis, it is possible to distinguish between egoistic and altruistic forms of hedonism. While for the former it is one's own pleasure that should be taken care of and increased, the latter argue that the pleasure one should seek is the pleasure of the highest possible number of people. An example of egoistic hedonism is ancient Epicureanism (preceded by the Cyrenaic school, founded by Aristippus of Cyrene), while classic utilitarianism, as defended by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, is the greatest representative of altruistic hedonism. Both types of hedonism define happiness as the prevalence

⁷ Given the limitations of space, some important theories needed to be left out, the most relevant of which is virtue ethics theory, which shows some interesting converging points with Nietzsche's understanding of happiness, as well as important divergences, especially concerning Nietzsche's understanding of virtue and negative appreciation of traditional virtues. A proper treatment of this tension is beyond the scope of this article. On Nietzsche and virtue ethics, see especially Solomon, "A More Severe Morality;" Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*; Slote, "Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics;" Swanton, "Nietzschean Virtue Ethics;" and Swanton, "Nietzsche's Virtue Ethics."

⁸ Fletcher, "Objective List Theories," 149. See also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 493.

⁹ On psychological or motivational hedonism as opposed to ethical hedonism, see Moore, "Hedonism."

of pleasure over pain, whether in an individual human life (as defended by the former) or in a given society or community (as argued by the latter).¹⁰

This is the vision of human happiness that Nietzsche attacked most consistently and directly throughout his productive life, both in its egoistic and in its altruistic form. His criticisms are multiple and diverse, but they essentially concern the identification of pleasure and pain as ultimate criteria of value. Indeed, contrary to what hedonists assume, for Nietzsche pleasure and pain are not two atomic, opposed, mutually exclusive elements but rather solidary, correlative, and complementary components of any human life.¹¹ It is impossible to think of one without the other, and the possibility of a life free of suffering is, according to Nietzsche, nothing but an illusion. In a posthumous fragment from 1887, Nietzsche calls this concern with suffering “naïve” and the idea of “eternal bliss” (with which he often associates religious people, but also Epicureanism) a “psychological nonsense” – just like the “desire to get rid of bad weather,” as he adds in a passage from *Ecce Homo*.¹² It is, furthermore, just like any “negative definition of happiness” that aspires to “a final state of some sort,”¹³ a pathologically construed nonsense, for as he claims in the same fragment:

Brave and creative men *never* consider pleasure and pain as ultimate values—they are epiphenomena: one must *desire* both if one is to achieve anything—. That they see the problem of pleasure and pain in the foreground reveals something weary and sick in metaphysicians and religious people.¹⁴

A life without pain or suffering would thus, from a Nietzschean perspective, be undesirable even if it were possible, and any conception of happiness that is based on these parameters is base, shallow, and superficial. As Nietzsche argues in *The Gay Science*, “happiness and misfortune (*Glück und Unglück*) are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or – as with you – *remain small* together!”¹⁵ Even though such a conception of happiness may satisfy the masses, the “herd,” it is unsuitable for higher human beings, who aspire to more than mere pleasure and comfort.¹⁶ Higher and deeper natures are distinguished, Nietzsche claims, not only by their refusal to take pleasure and pain as ultimate criteria of value but also by their fearlessness and readiness to accept a great amount of suffering as a condition of their higher form of existence. As Nietzsche claims of Homer, with his kind of “happiness in one’s soul one is also more capable of suffering than any other creature under the sun! Only at this price can one buy the most precious shell hitherto washed ashore by the waves of existence!”¹⁷

¹⁰ For more on the relation between hedonism and happiness, at both an individual and a collective level, refer to Veenhoven, “Hedonism and Happiness.”

¹¹ See e.g., Nietzsche, KSA 13, 14[173].

¹² See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” §4.

¹³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, “Preface,” §2.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, KSA 12, 8[2]. See also Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, “Preface,” §2: “Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some *finale*, a final state of some sort, every predominantly aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, permits the question whether it was not illness that inspired the philosopher;” and KSA 13, 14[174]: “Human beings do *not* seek pleasure and do not avoid displeasure Pleasure and displeasure are mere consequences, mere epiphenomena – what human beings want, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an increase of power. ... Pleasure or displeasure follow from the striving after that; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it. – Displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact ...; human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it; every victory, every feeling of pleasure, every event, presupposes a resistance overcome” (WP 702). On pleasure and pain as epiphenomena, see Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 270 ff.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §338.

¹⁶ See e.g., Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §228. Nietzsche associates this conception of happiness and the corresponding experience of suffering, misfortune, and displeasure as “evil, hateful, deserving annihilation, as a defect of existence” to the religion of pity or compassion and what he describes, with scorn, “*the religion of snug cosiness*.” As he significantly comments: “Oh, how little do you know of the *happiness* of man, you comfortable and good-natured ones” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §338). See also Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” §4, where Nietzsche describes this obsession with well-being and refusal of all kinds of distress as a “form of petty happiness” typical of “herd animals” and “last men” but not of great human beings.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §302. See also “the discipline of suffering” in *Beyond Good and Evil*, §225, and the case of Nietzsche and Zarathustra in *The Gay Science*, “Preface,” §3, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the Higher Man,” 6, respectively.

In sum, Nietzsche dismisses ethical hedonism as naïve, superficial, nihilistic, and unable to produce great human beings. Conceptions of happiness that value pleasure over pain promote stability and conformity rather than creativity, growth, and self-overcoming, and as such they are unable to promote greatness and higher forms of existence. A possible Nietzschean conception of happiness will thus necessarily reject taking pleasure and pain as ultimate criteria of value: both are necessary components of human life, and a useful concept of happiness must integrate both. Nietzsche insists that pain is as valuable, useful, and beneficial as pleasure and gives several examples throughout his work – and life – of how pain and suffering can be used to one’s own advantage.¹⁸ The opposite attitude, which views pain as a defect, an error, a purely negative experience that one should strive to eliminate or at least keep to a minimum – as expressed in hedonism and utilitarianism – remains, for Nietzsche, a deeply nihilistic attitude toward existence with very negative effects, both at an individual and at a cultural level.¹⁹

This does not mean that Nietzsche neglects the problem of suffering and how one’s relation to it might prevent the development of a satisfactory relation to life as a whole. On the contrary, Nietzsche takes the problem of suffering seriously, and it is one of the main themes of his work. As we shall see, however, rather than recommending strategies for reducing or eliminating it from one’s life, he strives to transform our usual relation to it: rather than seeing it as a negative experience one must avoid, one should learn to accept it as a necessary (and transient) part of life that can even be a valuable and creative force of transformation and self-overcoming toward a truly satisfactory and meaningful life.

2.2 Desire Satisfaction

Let us now turn to the desire satisfaction theory of happiness, which, as the name indicates, shifts the focus from the attainment of pleasure to the satisfaction of desires. According to this theory, defended by authors such as Derek Parfit and Shelly Kagan,²⁰ the happiness of a life is strictly dependent on the satisfaction of an individual’s desires. Happiness is measured according to the number of desires an individual is able to satisfy in her life. More concretely, one is happy if most of one’s desires are satisfied, and conversely, one is unhappy if most of one’s desires are not satisfied. According to this theory, desires are subjective and depend on each individual’s values, aspirations, and priorities in life, which is why they cannot be objectively and/or universally determined. This means that desires vary according to the human being in question, as do the possible forms of human happiness, which also cannot be universalized. All desires are relevant in this theory: what determines their importance in the context of an individual’s life is the intensity of each particular desire. For the same reason, “goods” that are not desired are completely irrelevant to the individual’s happiness, such that a certain object should only be pursued if it is desired by the individual and has importance for his or her sense of happiness.

When compared to ethical hedonism, the theory of desire satisfaction has two significant advantages from a Nietzschean perspective. First, by determining the subjectivity of desires and rejecting the possibility of determining happiness from an objective and universal point of view, it respects the individuality and absolute singularity of each individual, a fundamental component of what in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche calls “health of the soul.”²¹ According to Nietzsche in §120 of this work, where he criticizes the set of moral recipes for happiness (*eudaimonia*) in ancient philosophy and the idea that there is *one* (moral) formula of happiness that equally applies to all human beings, “there is no health as such,” but rather “innumerable healths,” such

¹⁸ See e.g. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface, §2–3, §318, §370; *Beyond Good and Evil*, §225; *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am So Wise,” §1; KSA 9, 11[116]; KSA 9, 15[55].

¹⁹ See e.g. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” §4. On this point, see Faustino, “Nietzsche’s Therapy of Therapy.”

²⁰ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*; and Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*. On the desire satisfaction theory see also Bruckner, “Subjective Well-Being and Desire Satisfaction;” Shaw, “Desire and Satisfaction;” Dietz, “Making Desires Satisfied;” Mariqueo-Russell, *A Defense of the Desire Theory of Well-Being*.

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §120.

that health can “look in one person like the opposite of health in another.”²² For Nietzsche, both the “health of the body” and the “health of the soul” are absolutely individual and subjective: they depend, as Nietzsche explains in the same aphorism, “on your goal, your horizon, your powers, your impulses, your mistakes and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul.”²³ For the same reason, there is no “happiness as such,” no “happiness in itself,” no universal formula of happiness: happiness is subjective and dependent on the absolute singularity of each human being – a thesis that Nietzsche clearly shares with the theory of desire satisfaction.

The second point of convergence between Nietzsche’s views on happiness and this theory is the importance ascribed to desire, which, contrary to pleasure, is for Nietzsche a fundamental component of human life. Indeed, as Nietzsche observes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, desire is the most basic driving force of human life and experience: “[...] our world of desires and passions is the only thing ‘given’ The world seen from inside ... would be just this ‘will to power’ and nothing else.”²⁴ According to this thesis, which Nietzsche formulates in the form of a hypothesis, life itself is a will – more specifically, a will to power. The essence of the will is precisely to *desire*, which is the major source of creativity, growth, self-transformation, and self-overcoming in the world, particularly in human life. For this reason, Nietzsche is extremely critical of Christianity and all anti-natural forms of morality that have condemned and tried to castrate or limit human desire: for Nietzsche, to condemn desire is to condemn life.²⁵

Nietzsche’s main opposition to the theory of desire satisfaction is related to his particular understanding of the structure and role of human desire and, consequently, to his stance on desire- (and self-)satisfaction. As we have seen, Nietzsche assumes the hermeneutic hypothesis that life is determined by a will to power. The will to power is a dynamic force that drives all living beings to affirm and expand their power in the world. Accordingly, it expresses itself in a desire to grow, expand one’s forces and power over other forces, overcome oneself, and affirm oneself in the world.²⁶ This expansion is accomplished through the overcoming of resistances,²⁷ which in a broad sense can be understood as the satisfaction of one’s desires. The harder it is to overcome an obstacle or satisfy a certain desire, the greater the feeling of power and self-realization.²⁸ For Nietzsche, happiness is defined by *this very feeling* (of power, growth, self-overcoming) and not by the feeling of satisfaction itself (or by the attainment of the goods one desires). As he observes in *The Anti-Christ*:

What is good? —Everything that enhances one’s feeling of power, will to power, power itself.

What is bad? —Everything stemming from weakness.

What is happiness? —The feeling that power is *growing*, that some resistance has been overcome.

Not contentedness, but more power, *not* peace, but war; *not* virtue, but prowess (virtue in the style of the Renaissance, *virtù*, moraline-free virtue).²⁹

²² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §120. For Nietzsche’s critique of different uses of morality as universal formulas for happiness, see also *Daybreak*, §106, §108, §132 and *Beyond Good and Evil*, §228.

²³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §120.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §36.

²⁵ See e.g., Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” §1, §3, §4. Nietzsche is thus highly supportive of a healthy cultivation (or “spiritualization”) of all human drives, instincts, affects, passions, and desires, as a means not only to a flourishing life but also to a higher stage of humanity. See e.g. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §560; *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” §11: “To have to fight the instincts – that is the formula for decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness is equal to instinct;” *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” §3.

²⁶ See e.g., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On Self-Overcoming.” On the will to power as self-overcoming versus other possible interpretations of “power” in this regard, see especially Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 260 ff.; and Reginster, “Nietzsche’s New Happiness,” 27ff.

²⁷ See e.g. Nietzsche, KSA 13, 11[111]: “all expansion, incorporation, growth is striving against something that resists” (WP 702). See also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §259; KSA 12, 9[13]; KSA 12, 9[151]; KSA 13, 11[75].

²⁸ See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the Thousand and One Goals”: “A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Observe, it is the tablet of their overcomings; observe, it is the voice of their will to power. Praiseworthy to them is whatever they consider difficult; what is indispensable and difficult, is called good, and whatever stems from the highest need and still liberates, the rarest, the most difficult – that is praised as holy.”

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §2.

Summing up, even though Nietzsche agrees with the importance of desire satisfaction in human life and, in line with the desire satisfaction theory of happiness, stresses the singularity of one's desires (and hence of one's happiness), he would also be critical of this theory for two main reasons. First, from a Nietzschean point of view, what is important is desire itself, the maintenance of desire – not its satisfaction. Indeed, desire is only a source of creativity, growth, and self-overcoming if it remains active. A hypothetical situation where all of one's desires are satisfied would thus be undesirable, for, as Nietzsche claims in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “in the end, we love our desire and not the thing desired.”³⁰ In other words, humans essentially desire to desire, and this is why desire should be promoted and intensified, not eradicated, reduced, or completely satisfied. The satisfaction of desires is a means (of growth and self-overcoming), not an end in itself, for desire is a self-renovating force, and the overcoming of resistances never leads to a final state.³¹ As Reginster puts it, “the will to power is not a will to a *state in which resistance has been overcome*” but, quite the contrary, “a will to the *very activity of overcoming resistance*.”³² For this reason, happiness is necessarily a process for Nietzsche, not an end: an endless process of “active self-empowerment,”³³ as Wienand puts it. Second, in line with a common criticism of the theory of desire satisfaction, Nietzsche was well aware that our desires do not always correspond to what would truly promote our happiness or a flourishing life. On the one hand, even though desire is a source of creativity and growth, certain desires can also be self-destructive (or involve self-denial, self-sacrifice, or self-violation, whether consciously or not). On the other hand, even though desires can be an expression of one's singularity, in most cases they are socially and culturally constructed (they are what Nietzsche calls “herd desires”).³⁴ In these cases, they are a hindrance to the expression and development of one's singularity, and as a consequence, they end up hindering rather than promoting human flourishing or happiness.

2.3 Objective List Theories

What about objective list theories? Objective list theories aim to overcome an objection that is often made against the desire satisfaction theory – one that Nietzsche, as we have just seen, to some extent anticipated – namely the existence of irrational or misguided desires that do not contribute to human flourishing. An obvious example is desires that correspond to addictions (such as smoking, drinking, gambling, etc.), but also unrealistic or unfulfillable desires (such as the desire to fly) or conflicting desires (e.g. the desire to eat abundantly and at the same time lose weight). Desire satisfaction theories must encompass these desires but may neglect fundamental goods that, according to objective list theorists, are fundamental components of well-being. Accordingly, objective list theories determine a set of goods that are considered *objectively* relevant to happiness, independently of the subjective relation individuals might have toward them. In other words, proponents of these theories – ranging from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen³⁵ – maintain that there is a list of goods that cannot be missing in a happy life, such that individuals who do not possess them cannot objectively be considered happy (even if, subjectively, they do feel happy). As such, the lists

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §175. Refer to Reginster, “Nietzsche’s ‘New Happiness’” for an illuminating account of the “elusiveness of fulfillment” associated with the satisfaction of desire, on the basis of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. As Reginster explains, “a state of complete satisfaction, in which nothing is left to be desired,” leads not to fulfillment but to one’s feeling “dissatisfied, perhaps even empty and depleted” (*op. cit.*, 17). Contrary to Schopenhauer, however, Nietzsche views the “elusiveness of fulfillment” not as regrettable or incompatible with human happiness but rather as “an essential and distinctive feature of the good life” (*op. cit.*, 26).

³¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On Self-Overcoming”: “And this secret life itself spoke to me: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am that which must always overcome itself.’”

³² Reginster, “Nietzsche’s ‘New Happiness,’” 29. See KSA 13, 14[174].

³³ Wienand, “Discourses on Happiness,” 117.

³⁴ See e.g., Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §44, §202.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*; Sen, *Development as Freedom*. On the objective list theories of well-being, see esp. Fletcher, “Objective List Theories;” Rice, “Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being.”

contain things that are objectively, intrinsically, and uncontestably good and fundamental to any human life. Even though some lists are monistic (establishing only one fundamental good that ensures the happiness of a life), most are pluralistic (listing several goods that are relevant and indispensable to a flourishing life). Although there are currently several lists and no consensus has been reached on one particular set of goods, the lists generally include things such as health, education, meaningful relationships, self-esteem, work, basic needs (food, water, clothes, and shelter), and security.

Even though objective list theories address a concern that Nietzsche himself would have had regarding the desire satisfaction theory, their proposed solution is in deep contrast with some of Nietzsche's core beliefs on human flourishing. In particular, Nietzsche would certainly reject the idea that happiness, human flourishing, or even well-being can be objectively determined for all human beings. As he claims in *Daybreak*,

[i]nsofar as the individual is seeking happiness, one ought not to tender him any prescriptions as to the path to happiness: for individual happiness springs from one's own laws unknown to others, and prescriptions from without can only obstruct and hinder it.³⁶

As we have seen, for Nietzsche human beings are singular individuals, and thus what constitutes their happiness is equally singular. What contributes to the happiness of one human being may contribute to the unhappiness of another, for "what is right for someone absolutely *cannot* be right for someone else."³⁷ For the same reason, Nietzsche was skeptical of the idea of a particular set of goods that are relevant to every human being or that any individual should pursue. Human beings are different, and what is valuable to one person might be irrelevant to another – even when it comes to the basic goods the objective lists generally include. Among other things, Nietzsche is known to have valued – or learned to take advantage of – conditions such as sickness, solitude, and an extremely frugal lifestyle, in a way that would likely run against most objective list theories. Above all, Nietzsche valued individuality and singularity and believed that each human being should pursue his or her own values and goods (those that promote the person's own and equally singular flourishing and self-overcoming). Models that prescribe universal recipes for happiness are not only "doomed to failure"³⁸ but obstacles to the promotion and development of true singularity and greatness among human beings. As Isabelle Wienand concludes, "it is therefore neither possible nor useful to conceive of an objective definition of happiness, since every single individual is, or at least can potentially become, the legislator of his or her own happiness."³⁹

It could be objected that also Nietzsche believed that there are fundamental ingredients of happiness or human flourishing, such as singularity, creativity, self-mastery, sovereignty, and self-overcoming – and that in this sense also Nietzsche can be included among the objective list theorists. It must be noted, however, that contrary to objective list theorists, Nietzsche posits human traits, capacities, and potentialities as fundamental components of happiness, not things or goods that a happy life must contain in order to be considered happy. These are, in general, potentialities that human beings are able to develop regardless of the political, social, or cultural circumstances in which they find themselves, in contrast to objective list theories, which maintain that certain basic goods are owed by governments to all citizens. In addition, the capabilities or character traits that Nietzsche views as fundamental to a flourishing life do not belong to a particular way of life (not even in its most basic traits, such as being healthy, educated, having a job, maintaining meaningful relationships, etc.). On the contrary, they allow for a great multiplicity of ways of life and promote the singularity of each individual life. Finally, as we have seen, Nietzsche rejected the possibility of determining happiness from an objective point of view, regardless of the subjective experience the individual has of her life: happiness is subjective and necessarily dependent on an equally subjective evaluation and judgment, which only the individual can carry out.⁴⁰

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §108, translation modified.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §228.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §120.

³⁹ Wienand, "Discourses on Happiness," 114.

⁴⁰ See Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §108: "individual happiness springs from one's laws unknown to others" (translation modified).

3 Nietzsche on Happiness and the Meaningful Life

Let us now consider Nietzsche's own positive notion of happiness and the meaningful life. From the above discussion of the main contemporary theories of happiness and what Nietzsche would have thought of them, we can draw a series of preliminary conclusions that are essential to understanding Nietzsche's own views on happiness. First, pleasure and pain are not the ultimate criteria of value (and not even decisive) when it comes to determining an individual's happiness. Second, happiness is subjective and dependent on the absolute singularity and individuality of each particular human being. Third, desire is a fundamental component of human life, and happiness is connected to the intensification of desire and the feeling of power related to self-overcoming. Finally, and as a consequence, happiness is a process, not an end state. When it comes to characterizing Nietzsche's views on happiness, the notion of human *flourishing* is likely a more accurate concept: not only does the notion of (human) flourishing emphasize process and activity (while happiness tends to be associated with an end state), but it also involves a broader sense of realization of one's potential and an overall sense of fulfillment and meaningfulness, which, as we shall see, are central elements in Nietzsche's views on the topic.⁴¹

Indeed, one last factor that needs to be taken into account when sketching a possible Nietzschean concept of happiness or human flourishing is the problem of *meaning*. While this problem is not thoroughly addressed by any of the previously discussed theories of happiness, it is likely the most important element of Nietzsche's views on the matter. Indeed, in the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche identifies the lack of meaning or purpose for suffering as *the* problem of human existence, the most pressing issue for which humans must necessarily find a solution or an answer. As we read in the last section of the third essay:

Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind [...].⁴²

As the final sections of the *Genealogy* make clear, the most important thing when evaluating one's life is not the prevalence of pleasure or pain but one's sense of meaning or purpose. According to Nietzsche, human beings do not necessarily avoid suffering – they may even welcome it and will it, provided it has meaning. Indeed, one might have everything a happy life is thought to objectively require and still not have a sense of happiness or fulfillment if one's life lacks meaning; conversely, if one's life has meaning or purpose, all possible circumstances (even apparently unfavorable ones) can be integrated into a whole that is meaningful to the individual. As Nietzsche claims at the beginning of the epigram of *Twilight of the Idols* which opens this essay, “[i]f you have your ‘why?’ in life, you can get along with almost any ‘how?’”⁴³ This means that, according to Nietzsche, the happiness (or meaningfulness) of a life depends not on attaining pleasure, satisfying particular desires, or obtaining certain basic goods but on having a purpose, that is, on feeling that one's life has *meaning*.

But how does one's life acquire meaning, or how can one make one's life meaningful? In the vast majority of cases, meaning is acquired from the outside, and religion tends to be the strongest candidate in this regard. For this reason, Nietzsche views the human need for meaning not only as the most fundamental problem of human existence but also as its greatest “curse.” Indeed, it is precisely because of this ineradicable need that Western culture has fallen prey to what Nietzsche calls the “ascetic ideal”: a worldview of Christian inspiration that offered a meaning (the “why”) of human existence but at the cost of a complete negation and castration of

⁴¹ On the distinction between happiness and flourishing, see Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 15 n.5. Nietzsche is here very probably influenced by ancient eudaimonic conceptions of happiness, which played a decisive role in Nietzsche's own version of the concept. Discussing the ancient philosophical influences of Nietzsche's account of happiness is, however, beyond the scope of this article. On the topic, especially Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness;” Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*; Urstad, “Nietzsche and Callicles;” Roos, “A Nietzschean Account;” Rempel, “Nietzsche and the ‘Happiness of Repose;” Turner, “Nietzsche and Happiness.”

⁴² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III, §28.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Arrows and Epigrams,” §12. The whole aphorism reads: “If you have your ‘why?’ in life, you can get along with almost any ‘how?’. People don't strive for happiness, only the English do.”

life (a “how” that is completely inimical to life). According to Nietzsche, in exchange for this meaning, human beings were led to devalue their bodies, to condemn the senses, to castrate their desires, instincts and passions, to annul their individuality for the sake of the “herd,” to see their suffering intensified with feelings of guilt and sin, and finally, to devalue their earthly life for the sake of redemption in a putative “other world” – in short, life was given meaning, but at the cost of its complete negation.⁴⁴ Christianity and its life-denying morality are thus, in Nietzsche’s eyes, largely responsible for the nihilism he diagnoses in Western culture as a whole. If human beings are truly to flourish, *this* purpose must be overcome: as Nietzsche claims in a posthumous fragment, “a new purpose – that is what mankind needs.”⁴⁵

Given that individuals cannot live without a purpose or meaning, the alternative to life-denying meanings imported from the outside would be the creation of one’s own meaning – a goal to which Nietzsche dedicates much effort, especially in his middle and late works. Indeed, if life is to be affirmed in its entirety and singularity preserved, meaning must be sought and created by each individual, according to their own particular needs, aspirations, and life goals. This is not independent of two important *topoi* in Nietzsche’s work. First, the revaluation of all values leads to a reassessment (and potential rejection) of the Judeo-Christian life-denying morality and the individual creation of new values based on one’s own singular needs, desires, and aims. In the wake of the “death of God” and in the absence of divine moral authority, Nietzsche encourages his readers to take absolute responsibility for their own lives, actions, and individual destinies. Second, but in strict connection with the previous point, the self-creation or cultivation of one’s character, which Nietzsche urges in several key passages. As he claims in a famous aphorism from *The Gay Science*, “you should become who you are.”⁴⁶ In another passage from the same work, he adds the following:

One thing is needful.—To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan In the end, when the work is complete, it becomes clear how it was the force of a single taste that ruled and shaped everything great and small—whether the taste was good or bad means less than one may think; it’s enough that it was one taste!⁴⁷

Nietzsche is one of the most important precursors of what Foucault would call the “aesthetics of existence.”⁴⁸ In order to preserve one’s individuality and reject life-denying ideals, one must create oneself “as a work of art,” “through long practice and daily work at it,”⁴⁹ integrating each of one’s traits (strengths and weaknesses), as well as one’s needs, priorities, and aspirations, into an artistic plan that is *meaningful to oneself*. As Turner notes, happiness is a process that “involves a heroic struggle against convention and habit to become eventually a self-constructed person.”⁵⁰ In this process of self-construction, the most important component is finding a “goal” that gives meaning to one’s individual existence and that makes the whole meaningful regardless of its particular details: “Formula for my happiness: a yes, a no, a straight line, a *goal* [...]”⁵¹

One can thus say that for Nietzsche, self-creation and self-cultivation are the key to an affirmative, fulfilling, and flourishing life. Since this process of self-cultivation (this work of the self on the self, aimed at continuous self-overcoming) is a never-ending task, and since the artistic plan is a perpetual work in progress, happiness is a never-ending progression as well: in Nietzsche’s eyes, it is a process (rather than an end state) in which one is permanently engaged and which can be sustained regardless of the circumstances in which one finds oneself, provided one’s affirmative relation to oneself and existence as a whole is preserved. In short,

⁴⁴ See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II, §24 and III, §23–28.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, KSA 12, 10[59]. On nihilism and its overcoming in Nietzsche, see especially Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §270. As is well known, this is also the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*: “How one becomes what one is.”

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §290.

⁴⁸ On Foucault and the aesthetics of existence, see Thacker, “Foucault’s Aesthetics of Existence;” Huijter, “The Aesthetics of Existence;” Smith, “Foucault on Ethics and Subjectivity;” Ratiu, “The ‘Aesthetics of Existence;” Peters, “Nietzsche and Foucault.” On Nietzsche’s self-creation and self-cultivation, see especially Hutter, *Shaping the Future*; Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche’s Search for Philosophy*; Ure, “Nietzsche’s Ethics of Self-Cultivation;” and Dennis, “Nietzschean Self-Cultivation.”

⁴⁹ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §290.

⁵⁰ See Turner, “Nietzsche and Happiness,” 486.

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Arrows and Epigrams,” §44.

happiness, for Nietzsche, is a certain way of life,⁵² dominated by an affirmative disposition toward one's singular and unique existence, which simultaneously integrates all of its past, present, and future events and gives meaning to the whole. Nietzsche's famous formulation of this fundamental disposition toward existence is *amor fati*:

My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it—all idealism is hypocrisy towards necessity—, but to love it [...]⁵³

Just like the thought of the eternal return of the same,⁵⁴ *amor fati* as an imperative implies that one develops the capacity to affirm and “say yes” to life as it is, including all the pain, suffering, loss, decay, and transitoriness it (necessarily) includes, not only accepting but loving all that destiny might bring to one's individual existence. As such, it also involves the capacity to accept that life does not have a transcendent meaning and that each of us is responsible for creating one's own.

Even though this acceptance and love of destiny might seem contradictory with one's absolute responsibility for one's own life and flourishing, the two precepts should be seen as complementary aspects of Nietzsche's theory of happiness. While *amor fati* involves embracing one's fate and affirming life in its entirety, even in the face of suffering and adversity, Nietzsche's emphasis on individual responsibility encourages individuals to take ownership not only of their actions but also of their reactions to external events. Even though individuals may not have control over external circumstances, they do have control over their responses to those circumstances and can cultivate the capacity to respond to them in ways that affirm life and promote self-overcoming. Far from representing passive acceptance of and resignation to one's fate, *amor fati* implies an active affirmation of life in its totality. In other words, *amor fati* demands the active engagement of the individual, such that the capacity to say “yes” to life and to one's individual existence is itself part of the “artistic plan” to which one should be committed – a plan that involves fashioning not only one's self but one's life and the things with which one is involved.

Indeed, in the *Gay Science* Nietzsche suggests that we should learn from artists how to make “things beautiful, attractive, and desirable when they are not,” so as to become “poets of our lives.”⁵⁵ It is through this type of activity, which presupposes learning and training, that individuals become capable of making things beautiful and hence discover (or artistically create) the beauty of their own lives and individual destinies.⁵⁶ In contrast to the ascetic ideal, such a fundamental attitude – which could in contrast be called an “aesthetic ideal”⁵⁷ – allows one to see life itself as an “aesthetic phenomenon”⁵⁸ of which one is simultaneously creator and spectator, and in which all pain and suffering is integrated in a whole that is beautiful and hence worthy of being fully loved and affirmed. Far from putting in question the value of one's existence, pain, suffering, and all life's challenges and adversities can be seen as opportunities for growth, transformation, and self-overcoming, hence fostering rather than hindering one's sense of meaning and fulfillment. It is precisely this aesthetic understanding of the world as a work of art and the capacity to be not only a passive spectator but an artist, fully engaged in the development of this artwork, that gives life and the whole an immanent meaning. Hence, it is this very capacity and internal disposition that, from a Nietzschean perspective, makes life happy

⁵² See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 279; and Turner, “Nietzsche and Happiness,” 482.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Clever,” 10. See also *The Gay Science*, §276; *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, “Epilogue,” 1; KSA 13, 16[32].

⁵⁴ See especially Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §341. On the eternal return as an ethical imperative and spiritual exercise, see Ure, “Nietzsche's Ethics of Self-Cultivation;” and Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265–91.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §299.

⁵⁶ Like any other form of love, love of life is something that requires learning, training, and persistence, until we are “rewarded in the end for our good will, our patience, our fair-mindedness and gentleness with what is strange, as it gradually casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty. That is *its thanks* for our hospitality” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §334). On the affirmation of life as learning and training in the context of what the authors call an “aesthetic education,” see the chapter dedicated to Nietzsche in Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

⁵⁷ See Ridley, “Nietzsche and the Arts of Life.”

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §107.

and meaningful. In Hadot's words, "happiness ..., for Nietzsche, consists in participating, even in the midst of suffering, in the great artwork of the world."⁵⁹

4 Conclusion

Nietzsche was suspicious (and critical) of the notion of happiness because he associated it with some modern definitions of happiness that in his view involve laziness, conformity, and self-satisfaction.⁶⁰ As I hope to have made clear, however, it is possible to find in Nietzsche an alternative concept of happiness or human flourishing – which he sometimes refers to as *his* happiness, Zarathustra's happiness, etc.⁶¹ – that might make an important contribution to current discussions on the topic.

Compared to contemporary approaches to happiness, the theory that is likely closer to Nietzsche's views on happiness is the life satisfaction theory.⁶² Developed in the context of positive psychology, this theory emphasizes, like Nietzsche, the importance of one's internal disposition toward life as a whole, regardless of material conditions, the possession of external goods, the satisfaction of particular desires, or the frequency of pleasure. On this theory, happiness is "mind-dependent" and "detached from the states of things external to the subject."⁶³ In other words, a fulfilled or meaningful life essentially depends on a given "disposition, an orientation toward the conditions of one's own life: what matters is not so much the experiences that happen to us but the way in which we accept and evaluate them."⁶⁴ In particular, happiness depends, as Nietzsche claimed, on having a *positive or affirmative* disposition toward life as a whole and on the capacity to *affirm* or *assert* oneself in the world: "the theories of 'life satisfaction' describe happiness as a favorable attitude toward one's life taken as a whole, a sort of global assessment that is not only a theoretical or intellectual consideration, but means embracing and asserting one's life as such."⁶⁵ Hence, both Nietzsche and life satisfaction theorists argue that one's sense of happiness, meaning, and fulfillment is entirely subjective and dependent on one's values, priorities, and aspirations.⁶⁶ Happiness is subjective, individual, and dependent on an equally individual and subjective sense of meaning and value that only the individual is able to assess and evaluate.

⁵⁹ Hadot, *Don't Forget to Live*, 141. In Kaufmann's alternative formulation, "ultimate happiness consists in the inextricable fusion of power and joy" (Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 279).

⁶⁰ In *Beyond Good and Evil* (§200), Nietzsche describes the typical notion of happiness as "primarily rest, lack of disturbance, repletion, unity at last and the 'Sabbath of Sabbaths.'" As Isabelle Wienand correctly notes, his criticism is mainly directed at modern conceptions inspired by Christianity, socialism, and utilitarianism. See Wienand, "Discourses on Happiness," 113.

⁶¹ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface, §3; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Prologue," §9, "The Child with the Mirror;" "The Night Song;" "On Unwilling Bliss;" "On the Mount of Olives;" *The Anti-Christ*, §1. See also *The Gay Science*, §337, where Nietzsche connects "the 'humanity' of the future" with "a happiness [*Glück*] unknown to humanity so far: a divine happiness full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness which, like the sun in the evening, continually draws on its inexhaustible riches, giving them away and pouring them into the sea, a happiness which, like the evening sun, feels richest even when the poorest fisherman is rowing with a golden oar!"

⁶² Since Nietzsche himself was critical of the word "happiness" for its historical and especially modern connotations, we will here abstract from the fact that proponents of life satisfaction theory generally distinguish life satisfaction from happiness. According to these theorists, happiness is a merely fleeting and transitory state, while life satisfaction presupposes a global assessment and evaluation of one's life as a whole. This global assessment and evaluation of one's life as a whole is, as we have seen, at the core of Nietzsche's views on the matter, which also acknowledge the importance of satisfaction with oneself (see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §290).

⁶³ Lavazza, "Happiness."

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*. Even though one version of this theory (the bottom-up version) holds that global life satisfaction is the result of satisfaction in the several domains of life, another version of the theory (the top-down version) shares with Nietzsche the conviction that it is overall satisfaction with one's life as a whole that has primacy and influences satisfaction in the particular domains. Refer to Ackerman, "Life Satisfaction Theory."

⁶⁶ This implies that "someone who is homeless or terminally ill may well have a higher life satisfaction than a wealthy person in good health, because they may place importance on a very different set of variables than those involved in quality of life" based on objective standards. See Ackerman, "Life Satisfaction Theory."

While Nietzsche's stance resonates with this branch of psychology, it also retains relevance as a powerful means of criticism and resistance to popular contemporary trends. Nietzsche's views on happiness remain relevant and current, in particular with regard to superficial conceptions of happiness and the so-called "happiness industry" generally leading to consumerism, as well as to surveillance and manipulation of the population by economic and political forces.⁶⁷ In contrast to the instant gratification and superficial optimism promoted by the happiness industry, Nietzsche encourages the pursuit of a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment, warning against conforming to external standards of happiness and the herd mentality that upholds them. By emphasizing the importance of accepting life's suffering, challenges, and adversities and embracing them as opportunities for growth, transformation, and self-overcoming, Nietzsche's notion of human flourishing contests all the modern conceptions of happiness that are focused on the attainment of easy pleasure, superficial contentment, and the satisfaction of immediate desires.⁶⁸

Moreover, it alerts us to the dangers of universalizing, standardizing, and quantifying happiness, as tends to be the case in most contemporary utilitarian approaches to happiness and well-being. Vehemently opposing the imposition of universal standards of happiness to all individuals, Nietzsche stresses the importance of recognizing heterogeneity and diversity in the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, by imposing rigid criteria and benchmarks for happiness, utilitarian accounts risk marginalizing and suppressing alternative modes of flourishing that deviate from the accepted norm. Besides, reducing happiness to a quantifiable metric undermines the diversity and complexity of human existence, promoting a superficial and reductive understanding of human flourishing.

Finally, Nietzsche's emphasis on the individuality, singularity, and subjectivity of each conception of happiness challenges the basis of most contemporary theories of happiness while at the same time calling attention to the individual's absolute responsibility for his or her own flourishing and self-fulfillment. Happiness is a matter of individually creating one's own values, cultivating one's own self and finding one's own singular meaning in life, rather than conforming to external standards and social expectations, as often conveyed by contemporary approaches to happiness and well-being. Indeed, the idea that happiness essentially depends on the individual's internal disposition toward the whole seems as old as revolutionary today – even if, as we have seen, Nietzsche does not stand alone in this regard.

Acknowledgments: Previous versions of this paper were presented at the International Conference "Happiness in Contemporary Continental Philosophy" (Radboud University, March 2023), the Research Colloquium in Practical Philosophy (University of Lisbon, May 2023) and the Ciclo de Conferências – Ação e Ética (PRAXIS, University of Beira Interior, February 2024). I wish to thank the audiences of these events for the exciting questions and suggestions, as well as to the anonymous peer reviewers, whose criticisms and comments helped me to rethink important aspects of my reflection and significantly improve the text.

Funding information: This work was funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Norma Transitória DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0042, IFILNOVA's strategic project UIDB/00183/2020 and the Exploratory Project "Mapping Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Ancient Model, A Contemporary Approach" (2022.02833.PTDC).

Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

⁶⁷ See Davies, *The Happiness Industry*.

⁶⁸ See Turner, "Nietzsche and Happiness," 481.

References

- Ackerman, Courtney. "Life Satisfaction Theory & 4 Contributing Factors." *Positive Psychology* (2018). <https://positivepsychology.com/life-satisfaction/>.
- Anderson, R. Lanier and Rachel Cristy. "What Is 'The Meaning of Our Cheerfulness'? Philosophy as a Way of Life in Nietzsche and Montaigne." *European Journal of Philosophy* 25 (2017), 1514–49.
- Ansell-Pearson, Keith. "Heroic-Idyllic Philosophizing: Nietzsche and the Epicurean Tradition." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 74 (2014), 237–63.
- Ansell-Pearson, Keith, *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy on the Middle Writings*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Ansell-Pearson, Keith and Lorenzo Serini. "Friedrich Nietzsche: Cheerful Thinker and Writer. A Contribution to the Debate on Nietzsche's Cheerfulness." *Nietzsche-Studien* 51:1 (2022), 1–33.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019.
- Bett, Richard. "Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus)." *Philosophical Topics* 33:2 (2005), 45–70.
- Bruckner, Donald. "Subjective Well-Being and Desire Satisfaction." *Philosophical Papers* 39:1 (2020), 1–28.
- Brobjer, Thomas H. *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character: A Study of Nietzsche's Ethics and its Place in the History of Moral Thinking*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995.
- Campioni, Giuliano. "'Gaya scienza' und 'gai saber' in Nietzsches Philosophie." In *Lecture della Gaia Scienza/Lectures du Gai savoir*, edited by Chiara Piazzesi, Giuliano Campioni, and Patrick Wotling, 15–37. Pisa: ETS, 2010.
- Davies, William. *The Happiness Industry. How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*. London and New York: Verso, 2016.
- Dennis, Matthew. "Nietzschean Self-Cultivation. Connecting His Virtues to His Ethical Ideal." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 53 (2019), 55–73.
- Dietz, A. "Making Desires Satisfied, Making Satisfied Desires." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (2023), 979–99.
- Faustino, Marta. "Nietzsche's Therapy of Therapy." *Nietzsche-Studien* 46 (2017), 82–104.
- Fletcher, Guy. "Objective List Theories." In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, edited by Guy Fletcher, 148–60. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Gödde, Günter, Jörg Zirfas, Reinhard G. Mueller, and Werner Stegmaier, eds. *Nietzsche on the Art of Living: New Studies from the German-Speaking Nietzsche Research*. Nashville: Orientations Press, 2023.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Don't Forget to Live. Goethe and the Tradition of Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Michael Chase. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- Huijer, Marli. "The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25:2 (1999), 61–85.
- Hutter, Horst. *Shaping the Future. Nietzsche's New Regime of the Souls and its Ascetic Practices*. Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006.
- Kagan, Shelly. *The Limits of Morality*. Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Third Edition – Revised and Enlarged. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.
- Kirkland, Paul and Michael McNeal, eds. *Joy and Laughter in Nietzsche's Philosophy*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022.
- Lavazza, Andrea. "Happiness, Psychology, and Degrees of Realism." *Front Psychol* 7 (2016), 1148.
- Mariqueo-Russell, Atus. *A Defense of the Desire Theory of Well-Being*. PhD thesis. University of Southampton, 2023.
- Moore, Andrew. "Hedonism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/hedonism/>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak*, edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, edited by Bernard Williams, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, edited by Adrian del Caro and Robert Pippin, translated by Adrian del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA)*, 15 vols., edited by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari. Munich, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge: Belknap, 2013.
- Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Peters, Michael. "Nietzsche and Foucault on the 'Aesthetics of Existence': Education as Self-creation." *Beijing International Review of Education* 4:3 (2022), 351–65.

- Ratiu, Dan. "The 'Aesthetics of Existence' in the Last Foucault: Art as a Model of Self-Invention." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 55:2 (2021), 51–77.
- Reginster, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Reginster, Bernard. "Nietzsche's New Happiness: Longing, Boredom, and the Elusiveness of Fulfillment." *Philosophic Exchange* 37:1 (2007), 2–41.
- Rempel, Morgan. "Nietzsche and the 'Happiness of Repose.'" *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9:1 (2017), 62–70.
- Rice, Christopher M. "Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being." *Ratio. An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 26:2 (2013), 196–211.
- Ridley, Aaron. "Nietzsche and the Arts of Life." In *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, edited by John Richardson and Ken Gemes, 415–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Roos, Christian. "A Nietzschean Account of Human Flourishing. Affirming the Will to Power Inside the Contours of Friendship." PhD Dissertation. University of Arkansas, 2011.
- Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Sharpe, Matthew and Michael Ure. *Philosophy as a Way of Life. History, Dimensions, Directions*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.
- Slote, Michael. "Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics." *International Studies in Philosophy* 30:3 (1998), 23–7.
- Smith, Daniel. "Foucault on Ethics and Subjectivity: 'Care of the Self' and 'Aesthetics of Existence'." *Foucault Studies* 19 (2015), 135–50.
- Shaw, Ashley. "Desire and Satisfaction." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 70:279 (2020), 371–84.
- Solomon, Robert C. "A More Severe Morality: Nietzsche's Affirmative Ethics." In *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, edited by Y. Yovel, 69–89. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986.
- Stegmaier, Werner. "Glück bei Nietzsche. Abenteuer des Erkennens." In *Glück*, edited by Dieter Thomä, Christoph Henning, and Olivia Mitscherlich-Schönherr. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2011. doi: 10.1007/978-3-476-00372-0_39.
- Swanton, Christine. "Nietzschean Virtue Ethics." In *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, edited by Stephen M. Gardiner. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Swanton, Christine. "Nietzsche's Virtue Ethics." In *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, edited by Stan van Hoof. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Thacker, Andrew. "Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence." *Radical Philosophy* 63 (1993), 13–21.
- Turner, Bryan. "Nietzsche and Happiness." In *Nietzsche and Critical Social Theory*, edited by Christine A. Payne and Michael James Roberts, 481–97. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- Ure, Michael. "Nietzsche's Ethics of Self-Cultivation and Eternity." In *Ethics and Self-Cultivation. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Matthew Dennis and Sander Werkhoven, 84–103. New York and London: Routledge, 2018.
- Urstad, Kristian. "Nietzsche and Callicles on Happiness, Pleasure, and Power." *Kritike* 4:2 (2010), 133–41.
- Veenhoven, Ruut. "Hedonism and Happiness." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4 (2003), 437–57.
- Wienand, Isabelle. "Discourses on Happiness: A Reading of Descartes and Nietzsche." *Ethical Perspectives* 16:1 (2009), 103–28.
- Wirth, Jason. "Nietzsches Fröhlichkeit. Gibt es etwas, über das absolut nicht mehr gelacht werden darf?" *Nietzscheforschung* 11 (2004), 143–52.