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Review

The Problem of Affective Nihilism in Nietzsche: Thinking Differently, Feeling Differently, by Kaitlyn Creasy

MUHAMAD ABDELMAGEED ^a

OSMAN CHOQUE-ALIAGA ^b

^a Cairo University (CU), Faculty of Arts, Department of Language and Literature, Cairo, Egypt

^b Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Faculty of Philosophy, Friburgo, Breisgau, Germany

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Kaitlyn Creasy's first monograph, i.e., *The Problem of Affective Nihilism*, seems to be an expected culmination for her intense scholarly engagement with Nietzsche's "nihilism," starting with her doctoral studies and the subsequent work published in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (2018) and (2019) — the latter is incorporated in the core body of her book¹. As a stark reminder of the rootedness of her account of "affective nihilism" in her previous studies,

^a MA is an Assistant Lecturer, PhD candidate, email: muhamad.kamal@cu.edu.eg

^b OC-A is a DAAD fellowship holder, PhD student, email: osman.choque@philosophie.uni-freiburg.de

¹ Creasy, Kaitlyn, "On the Problem of Affective Nihilism," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49, no. 1 (2018): 31-51 and "Making Knowledge the Most Powerful Affect: Overcoming Affective Nihilism," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 50, no. 2 (2019): 210-232.

it is worth mentioning that the secondary title of the book, namely: “Thinking Differently, Feeling Differently,” replicates the main title of her doctoral dissertation awarded in 2017 from the University of New Mexico². This shifting of wording arguably attests to the higher level of clarity and complexity she has been able to cultivate in the course of her examination of Nietzsche’s *Geist des Nihilismus* [Spirit of nihilism] since then.

One overarching aim that animates Creasy’s reading is to attain a comprehensive understanding of nihilism that features its sociohistorical and cognitive dimensions side by side with its affective dimensions, while emphasizing the transformative force Nietzsche’s nihilism could be in affirming—rather than denying—life. In her masterful overview of previous literature on the historical context of Nietzsche’s genealogy and nihilism throughout the Introduction and Chapter II, Creasy rejects multiple interpretations of Nietzschean nihilism for the vagueness of some or the narrowness of others, through being excessively cognitive (p. 20). From her standpoint, acknowledging the phenomenological dimensions of nihilism necessitates an extracognitivist engagement with psychological and physiological manifestations. Such an approach makes it possible, for Creasy, to situate Bernard Reginster’s observation of the crisis of values underlying the life-denying practices of Nietzsche’s nihilists within a broader context that includes, according to Nietzsche, affective states and “social institutions” and instincts. Creasy, nonetheless, concurs, at the end of Chapter II, that there is a “lack of systematicity” in Nietzsche’s account of nihilism (p. 24), an assertion that does not impinge upon her undertaking to draw out the contours of Nietzschean nihilism.

In Chapter III, Creasy starts laying out in detail her unique account of nihilism via opting to view the wide range of nihilistic phenomena as life-denying or negational of life [*die Verneinung des Lebens*] in Nietzsche’s own words. Faithful to the abovementioned, multilayered understanding of nihilism, she strives to demonstrate the phenomenological constitution of life-denying phenomena, entwining (a) the cognitive and (b) sociocultural with (c) the psychophysiological dimensions. In each of these three major dimensions, Creasy surgically highlights excerpts from Nietzsche’s published works evidencing the designation of given

² Creasy, Kaitlyn, “Thinking Differently, Feeling Negatively: Nietzsche on Nihilism and Radical Openness.” PhD Dissertation, University of New Mexico, 2017. ProQuest Theses and Dissertations.

beliefs, evaluative judgments, and epistemic practices as life-denying—albeit briefly for the “epistemic practices”, which she analyzes at length in later chapters. Among the famous Nietzschean examples she quotes is the belief in a ‘beyond’ which juxtaposes one’s earthly existence with an other-worldly, idealistic realm, condemning and devaluing one’s life as a result. Whether it is the personal conviction in a higher purpose or the general belief in the possibility of disinterested, extra personal knowledge, Creasy clarifies that these beliefs are presumably life-denying, because, as per Nietzsche’s reconstructed criteria, they devalue or negate the world as it is and enfeeble the willpower of individuals. On a larger, socio-cultural level, when societies embrace ideals that are damaging and harmful to wills—such as selflessness or self-sacrifice, society breeds life-denial which explains at large how institutions and ideologies could be life-denying and destructive to the will power of individuals.

Chapter IV inches closer to the book’s focus on “affective nihilism” by singling out the notion of “affect” in Nietzsche’s philosophical system—or *Leidenschaften* and *Gefühl* (p. 64). Creasy’s interest is directed towards the “transpersonal nature of affect” as encoded in the larger socio-cultural contexts and the personal experiential world of individuals. *Affekt* operates unconsciously through its impact on our motivations and drives. Creasy seems to align her interpretation with Paul Katsafanas³, yet, as characteristic of her style, she supplements his understanding of Nietzsche’s value-laden “affects” with her unique, broader distinction of “first-order” vs. “second-order” affects. While “first-order” affects are commonly understood as the forces shaping the directionality of one’s drives and buttressing one’s vital energies, “second-order” affects are the subtle powers that direct one’s inclination and disinclination in juxtaposition with the first order affects, operating as an example of “feedback loops” (p. 71-72).

In Chapter V, Creasy analyzes the meaning of nihilism and takes up the various, English-speaking sources and works on this topic. For the author, nihilism evidently has a cognitive characteristic; however, this approach should reconcile with Nietzsche’s view on the formation of outcomes. According to Nietzsche, behind every mental process, there is a facade

³ Katsafanas, Paul, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology”, in *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. J. Richardson and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

or a hidden ‘deeper’ cause. In that sense, a quite plausible way to explain Nietzsche’s nihilism would consist in considering the belief system, on the one hand, and one’s own condition, on the other, which the author calls “affective nihilism” (p. 89). This chapter advances a radical thesis: affective nihilism is a negative stance towards life. Such nihilism is produced because of the problem of the organization of drives which results in the weakness of one’s will. Certainly, in life there can be manifestations of denial or aspects in which life is weakened and affective nihilism, in this respect, is substantially aimed at undermining the will. For Creasy, affective nihilism is reflected in concrete life, for there is a “range of affects and affective” found in people’s emotional states, such as exhaustion, heaviness, weakness, and depression (p. 91). Nihilism is a “psychophysiological condition” (p. 104) in such a way that the objects of the affections are directed towards life, human existence, and earthly existence. Affective nihilism is, hence, reflected, on the one hand, in the sense of existence and in evaluative stances that deny life, on the other hand.

Chapter VI, titled “Affective Nihilists, Weak Agents,” contemplates the heterogenous forms of affective nihilism. She concentrates on two species, in particular: nihilism as drive suppression and as a fragmentation of the will. Regarding the former, Creasy makes a clear distinction between suppression of general drives and the suppression of characteristic drives. As for nihilism as fragmentation, the author understands it as a disintegration of the will [*Disgregation des Willens*], which is subdivided into “fragmentation of the will resulting from drives in conflict” and “fragmentation of the will resulting from the mere coexistence of one’s drives” (p. 113). In those two conditions, it is noted that when the will is weakened, disunity becomes rampant between one’s values and goals, affecting one’s drives existence in the world. Drives, albeit distinguishable from one another, cannot coordinate their manifestations. The theme of the will has often been emphasized by various interpreters of Nietzsche’s philosophy, yet the author chooses to frame it as an issue of agency which should be clearly understood to grasp the uphill endeavor, an affective nihilist may embark upon to overcome one’s affective affliction. Agency henceforth sets the theme from this chapter onwards to the possible routes of overcoming affective nihilism as Creasy gleans from Nietzsche’s texts.

In the subsequent chapter, i.e., “Cognitive Nihilism, Affective Nihilism, and Their Interplay,” Creasy specifies, in high precision, the concept of affective nihilism. Nietzsche assigns a set of individuals as nihilists, but who, according to the author, are not affective nihilists. Those who are nihilists, in Nietzsche’s own account, have a strong will, but they pronounce a negative judgment on life so far as it lacks value; however, their will is not undermined. Nietzsche differentiates, in this respect, between active and passive nihilism: the former is understood as an increase of strength and the latter as decay of strength. From the various explanations offered in which affective and cognitive nihilism are related, it is imperative to take the aforementioned distinction into consideration. Creasy considers that affective nihilism sustains the characteristics of cognitive nihilism. Cognitive nihilism consists of a system of beliefs or practices in which life is denied. What the author intends in this section is to study the reasons, hidden or apparent, that sustain affective nihilism.

The last chapter, titled “Overcoming Affective Nihilism,” is intended to offer a substantive answer to the Nietzschean question of affective nihilism. Chapter VIII attempts to underscore the forms or practical characteristics by which one could surpass affective nihilism. After reviewing the different threads that bind her account of Nietzsche’s nihilism in previous chapter, the author eventually proposes strategies for overcoming affective nihilism, which include the following: “experiential experience” (cfr. p. 138) and practices of self-knowledge. What is interesting in this section is that not only do these strategies concentrate on the acts of overcoming of nihilism, but they also show those forms or characteristics that could help one avoid returning to the same nihilism. In developing the psychophysiological traits, a thesis that she sustains in the book, and affective traits, Creasy states that the first thing to consider is the will of the person that is characterized by being “robust, effective, and unified” (p. 146). The last part is devoted to explaining Nietzsche’s strategies for overcoming affective nihilism. Vanquishing nihilism in the manner Nietzsche proposes is underscored as the effective way to transform how one feels and thinks. Creasy, in this regard, breaks down a detailed array of strategies and each one is given a thorough explanation within the overarching Nietzschean conceptualization of nihilism. The first of these strategies is experimentation consisting of a new communication with people; the second is self-narration, and the third is

the genealogical investigation of one's own beliefs and values. This section is a valuable aid to scholars and readers wishing to examine the practical visages of such powerful conceptual tools. Finally, Creasy is aware that these strategies do not presuppose a prompt actualization for each one of them; their importance, as we are reminded, lies in their capacity to potentiate the realization of diverse actions in the face of nihilism.

In general, the book offers an interesting interpretation of nihilism situating its subject-matter in contemporary, English-speaking discussions of the topic—despite the intensive work available in German, Spanish among many else. A legitimate question, nonetheless, looms over her discussion regarding the exact scope of Nietzsche's conceptualization of nihilism within his broader philosophical system. Creasy asserts that Nietzsche's thought is oriented to overcome only and exclusively affective nihilism from “variety of climates, locales, ideas, and thinkers” (p. 173). Such a conclusion on part of the author demands further scholarly investigation that does not risk reducing the multifaceted layers of Nietzsche's philosophy to the notion of nihilism. The author, in addition, does not delve deeper into the socio-historical, socio-cultural genesis of Nietzsche's examined philosophical intuition—contrary to the expectations readers may build from her brief historical examination of Nietzsche's nihilism in its nineteenth-century European context. In fact, some of the practices of self-knowledge studied in this monograph are not only due to Nietzsche's philosophical intuition, but that they are also indebted to his extensive readings on relevant topics—for instance, on nutrition⁴ which is coupled with the established observation that the Prussian philosopher was well-versed in the practice of taking care of one's own health—at least in his prime.

It would have been extremely valuable if Kaitlyn Creasy could have dedicated more space in her account to Nietzsche's unpublished letters⁵, which plays a significant role in shedding light on the development of Nietzsche's philosophical system as attested by Creasy

⁴ For example, Wiel, Josef, *Diätetisches Koch-Buch mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den Tisch für Magenranke von Josef Wiel Arzt in Bonndorf. Zweite, umgearbeitete und vermehrte Auflage*, Freiburg, Fr. Wagner, 1873, XVI. See Campioni, Giuliano, D'Iorio, Paolo, Fornari, Maria Christina, Fronterotta, Francesco and Orsucci, Andrea. *Nietzsches persönliche Bibliothek*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2011, p. 654.

⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSB). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015.

herself in her last chapter insofar as self-knowledge as narration is involved. Furthermore, since Creasy references the autobiographical character of the Prussian thinker's oeuvre, these epistles could be a productive starting point to enhance the comprehensiveness of her account of Nietzsche's nihilism beyond the question of "introspective self-knowledge" in subduing affective nihilism. One may be tempted to extrapolate from Creasy's incorporation of *Ecce Homo* in *The Problem of Affective Nihilism* that this text may be adequate enough to represent the biographical roots of nihilism in the core body of her account—a suggestion that is buttressed by her treatment of *Ecce Homo* as biographical material in her PhD dissertation⁶. The relatively, higher level of engagement with Nietzsche's epistles in Chapter VI at least represents a development for Creasy compared with the literal, marginal place they occupy in her PhD dissertation⁷. It remains an open question whether her future research may bring these rich sources of biographical information into the center of her philosophical analysis or not.

In sum, Kaitlyn Creasy's monograph is a significant addition to the scholarship on Nietzsche's nihilism. Scholars and readers alike will appreciate her ability to reconstruct the myriad threads that feed into Nietzsche's notion of affective nihilism.

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⁶ Creasy, Kaitlyn, "Thinking Differently," 281+.

⁷ Creasy, Kaitlyn, "Thinking Differently," 149, n. 415; 152, n. 427 as an example.