It is not a simple matter to figure out either what Nietzsche means by ‘nihilism’ or what he thinks we should do about it. To start with, there seem to be many different nihilisms discussed in different places in Nietzsche’s writings.\(^1\) Furthermore, though he seems at times to accept positions we might be inclined to think of as nihilistic, he also presents himself as showing us, or at least some of us, a path beyond nihilism.\(^2\) The following famous passage from a draft preface for his planned *Will to Power* dramatically captures both these facets:

> He that speaks here ... has done nothing so far but reflect: ... as the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself .... For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear. “The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values”—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically .... For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? ... because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism

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\(^2\) For an apparent endorsement of a nihilistic position, see *HH* I:32-33 and *TI*, “Improvers”, 1.

In citing Nietzsche’s texts I have basically followed the guidelines of the North American Nietzsche Society; I use the following English title acronyms: *Human, All Too Human (HH)*, *Gay Science (GS)*, *Genealogy of Morals (GM)*, *Twilight of the Idols (TI)* and *Will to Power (WP)*. References to *TI* list abbreviated chapter title and section number. The translations, where available, are listed in the bibliography. All other translations are mine. Roman numerals refer to major parts or chapters. Arabic numerals refer to sections.
before we can find out what value these “values” really had.— We require, sometime, new
values.\(^3\)

I have attempted elsewhere, in my paper “Honest Illusions”, to make sense of Nietzsche’s
views on nihilism and the creation of new values by ascribing to him what can be regarded as a
form of fictionalism about values.\(^4\) The label ‘fictionalism’ can be misleading here. The label is
often taken to suggest a view on which the requisite fictions are quite easy to come by: just
pretend, we might say while explaining the rules of cricket to someone, that the salt shaker is
the batsman and the pepper mill the bowler. However, I defend a view according to which the
aim of Nietzsche’s revaluations is to create honest illusions of value. Illusions are different from
mere pretences. Merely pretending that the fork in the glass in front of me is bent is different
from experiencing the illusion of a bent fork created by filling the glass with water. Such an
illusion is honest for the vast majority of us since we know that the fork is not in fact bent.
Creating an honest illusion of value thus involves a lot more than merely pretending that
something is valuable. Or so I have argued.

Now Bernard Reginster also takes up the challenge of figuring out what Nietzsche might
mean by nihilism and the revaluation of values in his book The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on
Overcoming Nihilism.\(^5\) However, he argues that there is an alternative interpretation of
Nietzsche’s views on nihilism and revaluation that makes as much sense—indeed he often
clearly leans towards thinking that it makes more sense—than the fictionalist reading of
Nietzsche. Not surprisingly, I do not think his arguments succeed. The task of this paper is to
show precisely where I think Reginster goes wrong.

\(^3\) WP P:3-4.

\(^4\) We will return to this below. For a defence of this interpretation of Nietzsche, see my
Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche’s Free Spirits”, in Nietzsche and

\(^5\) Bernard Reginster, The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 2006).
In order to do this I will focus on the metaethical issues that play a central role for Reginster in his articulation of Nietzsche's nihilism and Nietzsche's strategy for overcoming nihilism. I will begin by summarizing his intricate argument before turning to my objections.

1. **Nietzsche’s Nihilisms**

Reginster distinguishes between two kinds of nihilism in Nietzsche. The first kind involves realizing that there are no “objective values”, that “nothing really matters”. For “human beings who need their lives to have meaning, this lack of normative guidance spawns nihilism, understood as *disorientation*.” This form of nihilism is constituted by a metaethical claim about values. Though he does not use the label, this is what normally gets called an error theory in metaethics.

The second kind is the nihilism of *despair*. Here a conviction that our highest values cannot be realized in this world leads to an ethical claim: “it would be better if the world did not exist”. Reginster claims that nihilism as despair “is Nietzsche’s primary conception of nihilism” and that it is the overcoming of this nihilism that Nietzsche takes to be his fundamental task. What leads to despair is the value judgement that suffering is bad combined with the fact that life essentially involves suffering. Nietzsche wants to overcome this kind of despair by engaging in something called a “revaluation” of existing values.

All this, of course, raises a puzzle. Nihilism as despair only makes sense if one does *not* accept an error theory since despair only makes sense if one *does* think that some evaluative judgments are true, for example, that suffering *is* bad. But then, Reginster asks, “what are we

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7 I will discuss Nietzsche’s error theory in more detail below. For a description of such metaethical theories, see Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 111-27.

8 This is a line from Nietzsche, *WP 701*, which Reginster quotes (28).

to make … of the other version of nihilism, disorientation, which is also undeniably to be found in [Nietzsche’s] writings, and which conflicts with the conception of it as despair?”. “How”, he asks, “are we to make sense of this fundamental ambiguity in Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism?”.10

Here is the outline of Reginster’s answer. He suggest[s] that one inviting form of revaluation consists in showing that the nihilistic values lack the sort of objective standing on which the legitimacy of any value depends. It does overcome despair, since … there is [then] no reason to deplore the unrealizability of values that are deemed illegitimate. However, this strategy proves unsatisfactory, because it trades one variety of nihilism (despair) for another (disorientation).11

However, according to Reginster, Nietzsche believes that the inference here to nihilism as disorientation is a mistake because it depends on some “erroneous assumption” or the other.12

Here is how Reginster summarizes one version of the relevant inference and identifies the corresponding erroneous assumption:

If there are no objective moral facts for our moral judgments to report, these must be the expressions of a merely subjective ‘perspective.’ And if this is all they are, they lose their normative authority. But this inference rests on the assumption that the legitimacy of our values depends on their objective standing, their independence from our subjective perspectives. I will call this assumption normative objectivism.13

Now many of the terms used here—“objective”, “subjective”, “normative authority”, “legitimacy”, “standing”, “perspective”, and even, in this context, “expression”—are terms of which it is both true that different philosophers just choose to use them in different ways and that when philosophers claim to be unearthing some shared, more-or-less ordinary language concept the concept behaves very much like an essentially contested concept.14 Thus part of the task of

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10 Reginster, Affirmation, 34.
11 Reginster, Affirmation, 34.
12 Reginster, Affirmation, 69.
13 Reginster, Affirmation, 26.
14 The situation is made somewhat worse by Reginster’s introduction of the phrase “descriptive objectivism” for “the view that there are objective values” (10). I find this phrase misleading and so will avoid it for the rest of this paper; it suggests what is not intended here,
this paper will be to determine whether there are plausible understandings of these terms that allow Reginster’s arguments to go through. I will suggest not.

Back, then, to the supposed erroneous assumptions. In Nietzsche’s writings, Reginster claims, we find “two very different proposals” for how to respond to the purported inference to nihilism as disorientation. The first proposal is what Reginster calls normative subjectivism. This “is essentially a denial of normative objectivism”. The second proposal, the one I have defended elsewhere, is what Reginster calls normative fictionalism. “This second proposal, by contrast, does not reject normative objectivism but claims that the objective values that have been found not to exist can be replaced by fictionalist simulacra of objective values”.  

According to Reginster, Nietzsche does not choose between these proposals and thus, as Reginster puts it later in his book, “Nietzsche’s views on metaethics remain ambiguous”. This does not really matter, however, Reginster argues, since on either proposal we have managed to eliminate disorientation. Of course, we still have to face the problem of despair. The problem of

namely, that descriptive claims are about objective facts. It is cleaner, I suggest, to distinguish between our theory of what values must be like if they exist (normative objectivism or some alternative) and our view about whether values exist (understood, of course, in terms of whatever is the correct theory about what they must be like).

I should note that Reginster’s description in this context of the relationship between fictionalism and descriptive objectivism is misleading given the absence of certain other crucial distinctions. He writes: “[The fictionalist strategy] averts nihilistic disorientation by proposing descriptive objectivism as a form of make-believe” (10). This would be true of what is sometimes called “hermeneutic fictionalism”, but it is not true of the form of fictionalism that is actually discussed in Reginster’s book. The form of fictionalism he discusses is sometimes labelled “revolutionary fictionalism”. A hermeneutic fictionalist interprets the current discourse in fictionalist terms while the revolutionary fictionalist proposes fictionalism as a reform. We are usually hermeneutic fictionalists about contemporary adult “Santa Claus” discourse and some have proposed hermeneutic fictionalism for other more surprising areas of discourse, such as talk of “sakes” (I did it for John’s sake, but not Jill’s). However, Reginster only discusses revolutionary fictionalism, though not under that label. And a revolutionary fictionalist straightforwardly denies what Reginster calls descriptive objectivism. For more on these distinctions see Jason Stanley, “Hermeneutic Fictionalism”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25 (2001) and Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “The Return of Moral Fictionalism”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004).


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16 Reginster, *Affirmation*, 100.
despair will require a substantive revaluation of the value of suffering. On either proposal, though, so Reginster, our metaethical investigations will have shown us what is required to justify evaluative claims, and thus, in particular, what it takes to justify a set of values that result in suffering now being valuable. Once we have managed this, then we will no longer have any reason to despair and will have overcome the kind of nihilism Nietzsche is centrally concerned with.

2. Error Theory

Now to the problems I see in all this. Despite the quotation above about the ambiguity in Nietzsche’s metaethical views, in the end Reginster clearly leans towards normative subjectivism as being, at least, the way Nietzsche should have gone. This, I want to argue, is a mistake. Once we have looked carefully at the details of the positions and the arguments ascribed to Nietzsche, the fictionalist option is the more charitable interpretation of the texts.

In order to see the problems we will have to go back to those troubling terms—“objectivism”, “subjectivism” and their ilk—and try to unpack what they might come to. Normative objectivism, recall, is the view that the “legitimacy of our values”, or the “normative authority of a value depends upon its objective standing”. Talking of the legitimacy of a value or the normative authority of a value has the unfortunate tendency to suggest that something could be a value, in other words it could really be the case that suffering is bad, but that somehow badness could fail to have normative authority. I see no reason for thinking this and I see no reason for ascribing this view to Nietzsche. The better way to talk, then, is simply to talk about whether there are any values, or, even better whether or not our evaluative claims are true. Now, as the talk of objective standing suggests, the question here is what kind of facts make our evaluative or normative claims true. Normative objectivism is the view that the kind of fact that makes evaluative claims true is objective facts—whatever that means. In any case,

17 Reginster, Affirmation, 26 and 58.
this is a metaethical view about what we are doing when we make an evaluation. According to this view we are making a claim about objective evaluative facts. Nihilism as disorientation, then, is the error theory that denies that there are any such facts and claims that our evaluative judgements are therefore systematically false. As Nietzsche puts it:

   All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves ... all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination—and they have been falsely projected into the essence of things. (WP 12)

Or elsewhere: “In the entire evolution of morality, truth never appears: all the conceptual elements employed are fictions” (WP 428).

Like other error theories, this error theory is a combination of a semantic claim about what evaluative language purports to be about, namely, objective value facts, and an ontological claim that denies such facts.

At this point certain differences between normative subjectivism and normative fictionalism begin to matter. Normative fictionalism is completely compatible with the error theory. It accepts that the correct account of our current practices takes them to involve false beliefs but suggests that these false beliefs be replaced by make-belief. Fictionalism thus does not require disowning the error theoretic claims about our evaluative practices.

Normative subjectivism, on the other hand, is identified by Reginster as the rejection of the semantic claim about our evaluative language that leads to error theory. Thus ascribing normative subjectivism and an error theory to Nietzsche would be interpreting him as having contradictory views. This leads us to the first oddity in Reginster’s overall interpretation of Nietzsche. There are some standard ways of dealing with the apparent presence of two contradictory views in an author. One way is to reinterpret the textual evidence for one of the

18 More precisely that, as Miller puts it, “the positive, atomic sentences” are false: “The error-theorist will of course say that non-atomic moral sentences ... can be true: ‘It is not the case that murder is wrong’” (Miller, Contemporary Metaethics, 110 n. 2).

19 As mentioned earlier, this is thus a form of revolutionary fictionalism.
views and show that in fact, when interpreted correctly, the textual evidence does not support
the ascription of that view to the author. But Reginster does not take up the strategy of
showing that all the passages he cites in order to defend an ascription of an error theory to
Nietzsche do not in fact support that ascription. Perhaps for good reason, since, as I have
argued elsewhere, this is not easy to do. The other standard way to handle such situations is to
argue for a developmentalist view. The error theory, one might argue, was a view that Nietzsche
held at one point, but then gave up. But Reginster does not do this either. Again, there is good
reason for not attempting this since the error theoretic claims are not constrained to one period
of Nietzsche’s work. Thus we are left with the ascription of contradictory views to Nietzsche as
long as we insist on normative subjectivism. The solution, of course, is only to ascribe
fictionalism to Nietzsche. Round One to the fictionalist.

Further problems occur when we take a look at why Nietzsche, at least when, according to
Reginster, he is in his normative subjectivist mode, supposedly thinks that the semantic claim
of the error theory is false. Reginster here appeals to Harold Langsam. He takes on Langsam’s
ascription to Nietzsche of the following argument: “[N]ormative objectivism itself represents a
value judgment, which is legitimate only if it is objective. Given that the nihilist himself denies
the existence of objective values, it follows that his own normative objectivism is illegitimate”. The
error theory is to be rejected, according to this argument, because it contradicts itself. The
problem, of course, is the premise, namely, that normative objectivism itself represents a value

20 There is a third possible strategy where we take the error theoretic claims to be restricted
to a subset of all evaluative and normative claims, namely, the domain of moral evaluative and
normative claims. A lot of the passages that support an ascription of an error theory to
Nietzsche do seem to emphasis moral judgements and so this is a tempting strategy. I argue
against it on textual grounds in my “Honest Illusions”. In any case, Reginster does not take up
the strategy and, again, for good reason since, it turns out, it would conflict with his strategy
for revaluation.

21 Harold Langsam, “How to Combat Nihilism: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Critique of
Morality”, History of Philosophy Quarterly 14, no. 2 (1997).

22 Reginster, Affirmation, 70.
judgment. As normally construed the relevant claim in an error theory is a descriptive claim about what our moral judgments are about. It is something that we figure out by looking at our practices of making evaluative judgments. And indeed this is precisely how Nietzsche talks of it:

Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. ... Moral judgments, like religious ones, belong to a stage of ignorance at which the very concept of the real and the distinction between what is real and imaginary, are still lacking; thus ‘truth’ at this stage, designates all sorts of things which we today call ‘imaginings’. Moral judgments are therefore never to be taken literally: so understood [that is literally] they always contain mere absurdities. (TI “Improvers” 1)

Or compare the earlier comments I quoted about moral judgments involving false projections or their conceptual elements being fictions. These are all the typical semantic claims of the error theorist—moral judgements are beliefs in particular realities—combined with the typical ontological claims—these realities believed in are no realities: “there are altogether no moral facts” (TI “Improvers” 1). There is no indication here that Nietzsche takes the semantic claim—what Reginster calls normative objectivism—to be anything other than a metaethical semantic claim about our evaluative practices.

Now, of course, there are some philosophers who insist that such metaethical purely semantic claims are not really possible—that all one can make are evaluative or normative judgments here. Most of these contemporary thinkers—many of whom see themselves as inspired by various Kantian themes—in fact usually distance themselves from the label “metaethics” because they see themselves as attacking a fundamental presupposition of much of contemporary metaethics. Nonetheless, whether they are right or wrong, the point remains that their view is very, very controversial.23 It is hardly the kind of dominant philosophical view that one feels some pressure to ascribe to Nietzsche on grounds of charity. This is only made worse by the fact that Reginster, and for that matter Langsam, do not give us any arguments

for thinking this view is true let alone giving compelling textual evidence for ascribing it to Nietzsche. Thus, I suggest, there are no good grounds for ascribing Langsam’s argument against normative objectivism to Nietzsche. Thus no good grounds, as far as this argument goes, for thinking that Nietzsche thinks the error theory is false. Again fictionalism does not require giving up on the error theory. And so Round Two to the fictionalist.

3. Objectivism and Subjectivism

As I have already noted, I think it becomes clear over the stretch of Reginster’s book that though he officially claims, at least at some points, that Nietzsche does not choose between subjectivism and fictionalism, Reginster leans towards subjectivism. Here is one place this turns up. Reginster writes:

A fictionalist account of evaluation involves, to begin with, a claim about the existence of values. Thus, Nietzsche’s arguments ... though allusive at best, suggest that considerations like explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony ought to lead us to deny the existence of objective values. Fictionalism about value, however, also owes us an account of the nature of values. After all, we must have some idea of what kinds of things objective values would be if they did exist, in order to be able to act ‘as if’ there are such values. Unfortunately, Nietzsche has little to offer on the nature of objective values.24

In contrast the “subjectivist version of his strategy” supposedly does propose “an account of the nature of values”.25 Reginster’s text certainly suggests an invidious comparison being drawn here to the detriment of fictionalism. In any case, I do now want to draw an invidious comparison between the two, though one that is, so to speak, the other way around.

Note first something odd about how Reginster has set things up. It is not just fictionalism that has to tell us “what kinds of things objective values would be if they did exist”.26 Anyone committed to an error theory has to tell us “what kinds of things objective value would be if

24 Reginster, Affirmation, 98.
25 Reginster, Affirmation, 98.
26 Reginster, Affirmation, 98.
they did exist” since otherwise we would not be able to argue that, given what is actually in the
world, they do not exist, or so at least I have argued elsewhere. Furthermore, if subjectivism
is the denial of normative objectivism, then the subjectivist also needs to tell us what he or she
is denying. If we want to know what Nietzsche has to offer on the nature of objective values we
just need to turn to the parts of Reginster’s book where he ascribes the error theory to
Nietzsche and where he articulates normative subjectivism on the behalf of Nietzsche.
Reginster, this means, is committed to Nietzsche having quite a bit to say about the nature of
objective values. For Reginster then to claim that “Nietzsche has little to offer on the nature of
objective values” is thus, I suggest, odd and misleading. He should at least remind us of all
that has been and will be said and then show that this is still too little. However, to the degree
that it is too little, this will count equally against the ascriptions of error theory and normative
subjectivism. So no blows landed against fictionalism this far in the round. Round 3? A tie.

Now indeed, when we do turn to the sections in Reginster’s book on the error theory and
normative subjectivism we find quite a bit about what is supposed to be distinctive about
objective values. In fact, as I shall now argue, we find enough to show that it is very unclear
how normative subjectivism, as Reginster describes it, can actually be an alternative to
normative objectivism.

So what are objective values supposed to be and what is the subjective alternative
supposed to be? Now, as I indicated earlier, the terms “objective” and “subjective” can be tricky.
As a result, I am going to proceed slowly. Reginster points to various texts to argue that,
according to Nietzsche, an objective value would have to be a value that has an “origin”, as
Reginster puts it, that is “external” where being external is a matter of being “independent of
the agent’s will”. Here are some quotes: “Values have an external origin when they are
metaphysically independent from the contingent contents of the human will, that is to say,

27 Hussain, “Moral Fictionalism”.

28 Reginster, Affirmation, 56.
when their nature is not conditioned by that will”. The will, according to Reginster’s interpretation of Nietzsche, is just “the set of the particular drives, inclinations, or other proclivities with which this individual finds himself”. Thus what matters is that the value be metaphysically independent from the motivational states of the agent. He gives an example: “If the value of compassion is a divine decree, or a Platonic Form, then its nature is not affected by the contingent contents of an agent’s will”.29 Here is how I would put the point. The truth of the claim

(1) Compassion is good.

does not depend on my having any particular motivational states. The value of compassion is objective if the truth conditions for (1) are, for example, either of the following:

(2) God commands, “Be compassionate!”.
(3) Compassion is part of the Platonic Form of the Good.30

So far so good, but here is where things get tricky. Consider the following value judgement:

(4) Nadeem is a bad person.

Let us imagine that someone is making this claim because they know that I systematically, in ongoing violation of the Tenth Commandment, covet my neighbour’s wife. Some minority scriptural exegetes aside, coveting is a matter of having a desire. And so part of what makes the evaluative judgment expressed by (4) true is in fact that I have certain desires. Its truth does depend upon my motivational states.

But surely none of us think that somehow this shows that divine decree accounts of the relevant values are any less “objectivist” than we thought they were. My motivational states may be part of what makes (4) true but crucially its truth also depends on other things. It depends on the commandment, something which is not up to me and so is “objective” rather than “subjective”, as we are inclined to say. Here is the crucial conclusion to be drawn. We do not get subjectivism just because desires are part of what make an evaluative claim true. We

29 Reginster, Affirmation, 57.
30 Or something like that.
do not even get subjectivism if it turns out that given certain desires it is metaphysically necessary that certain evaluative claims are true; surely whether it is metaphysically necessary that God issues the commands he does or not cannot effect whether such a divine decree account would be objectivist in the relevant sense.

So what could subjectivism be? Well one classic possibility is *Naturalist Reductive Realism*. Standard issue naturalist reductive realists claim that evaluative and normative judgements are actually just judgements about our mental states.\(^{31}\) To say that something is good is just to say that, for example, I would desire it if I had full-information. Evaluative judgements look as though they are ascribing metaphysically problematic “external” or “objective” properties to things but actually they are just judgements about our own psychologies. Such views are meant precisely to avoid the kinds of arguments Reginster ascribes to Nietzsche for an error theory, namely arguments that appeal to explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony. Since, so the naturalist reductive realist claims, normative and evaluative facts are completely constructed out of facts of psychology explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony generate no pressures to get rid of them. But they are still facts so the title realism. And, in some sense, the facts are facts about “subjective” “internal” things and so perhaps this view should count as a form of subjectivism. We might call it subjective realism.

Now at times Reginster comes perilously close to ascribing such a view to Nietzsche.\(^{32}\) This is particularly true when Reginster takes Nietzsche to be following Schopenhauer closely.

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\(^{31}\) For a more extended description, see Miller, *Contemporary Metaethics*, 178-242.

\(^{32}\) This is the kind of view Brian Leiter basically ascribes to Nietzsche (Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 105-12. It is not quite clear whether Reginster sees how close he comes to Leiter’s view. Part of the problem is that Reginster says things that suggest that he does not quite understand Leiter’s view. He correctly takes Leiter as arguing that “Nietzsche accepts the objectivity of what he calls ‘prudential’ values” (Reginster, *Affirmation*, 274 n. 10). I take it that the “he” refers to Leiter and I take it that the use of “objectivity” here is meant to track Leiter’s use of “objective”. Leiter talks in this context of their being an “objective fact of the matter” about what is prudentially good for a person and he equates this with realism about
Schopenhauer writes, “[I]n short we call everything good that is just as we want it to be”. And Schopenhauer takes himself to be giving the “meaning of the concept good”. The subjectivist view that would follow most naturally from this is the view that “X is good” just means “X satisfies a desire of mine”. Or as Reginster puts it: determining that “X is good’ for an agent

judgements of prudential goodness (Leiter, Nietzsche on Morality, 147). However, Reginster continues his discussion of Leiter as follows:

Prudential value is defined in terms of the flourishing of beings of a certain type: whatever is conducive to their flourishing ... is ‘good’ for beings of that type. The normative significance of such prudential values is, however, very limited. For one thing, it cannot by itself provide the sort of normative guidance to which the nihilist aspires. For flourishing can indeed provide such guidance only if it is itself valuable, and, unlike the value it underwrites, its value cannot be a prudential value. For another thing, it is also worth asking whether prudential values can be values at all, whether they can possess real normative significance, without assuming the non-prudential value of flourishing itself. (274 n. 10)

This suggests that prudential value is essentially instrumental value and that the end relative to which prudential value is instrumental value is the end of flourishing. The value of flourishing then looks as though it needs some independent grounding. But this is to misunderstand, or misrepresent, Leiter’s position. Leiter’s position becomes clear once we recall his use of Peter Railton’s theory of prudential good (Peter Railton, “Facts and Values”, in Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays toward a Morality of Consequence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); originally published Philosophical Topics 14 (1986): 5-31). Such a theory attempts to given an account of what is good for a person, period—not what is instrumental valuable for achieving some independently valuable end. In attempting to develop a theory about what is good for a person we do use the notion of flourishing, but the result of our investigations is the set of facts about what is good for a person. If it turns out, for example, that being a philosopher is good for me, then this is just a fundamental evaluative truth. It does not depend on some other account of why flourishing is good. Rather, this fact tells me that being a philosopher partially constitutes my flourishing. The use of the adjective “prudential” is mean to mark a contrast with, on one side, merely instrumental value and, on the other, some perhaps more substantive notion of what is morally good. (For a more detailed and careful explication of such views, see Miller, Contemporary Metaethics, 178-217.)

Whether such a relational account of the good is an interpretively plausible view to ascribe to Nietzsche, particularly when Leiter adds that for Nietzsche “what counts as flourishing is relative to type-facts about that person” (106; second emphasis mine), is another matter. Reginster elsewhere raises worries about this: “Nietzsche himself never relativizes the notion of flourishing, which is at the core of the prudential conception of the good, to one or another type of man. On the contrary, he always speaks of “human flourishing”—“the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man (GM P:5-6; my emphases)” (Bernard Reginster, review of Brian Leiter, Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality (London: Routledge, 2002), Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (2003)).

simply requires determining whether or not the agent has a desire whose satisfaction is favored by $X$.\textsuperscript{34} This looks for all the world like a form of naturalist reductive realism.

However, Reginster cannot consistently ascribe any such view to Nietzsche. Such views have traditionally faced some version of the open-question argument and Reginster explicitly endorses the open-question argument and uses it to eliminate a different, more Aristotelian, naturalistic interpretive possibility— one in terms of the function of the human— later in his book.\textsuperscript{35} So on pain of contradiction he better not ascribe such a naturalistic reduction to Nietzsche.

Furthermore, despite what Reginster seems to think, the account does not fit with a strand of Nietzsche’s view that Reginster himself emphasises, namely, the suggestion that evaluative judgements are “interpretations” of the world from the viewpoint of our desires.\textsuperscript{36} After all on such a reductive account evaluative claims are just straightforward psychological claims. They are not interpretations in any interesting sense unless all psychological claims are interpretations.\textsuperscript{37} They are claims about which objects would satisfy our desires. They require no special standpoint— no special evaluative or affective perspective— in order to make.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 99

\textsuperscript{35} Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 153-54.

\textsuperscript{36} Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 75 and 98.

\textsuperscript{37} I am bracketing certain complexities that might arise were we to interpret Nietzsche as holding a more hermeneutical view of mental state ascription. I think this is fair since Reginster does not bring up this possibility. For a discussion of interpretationalist tendencies in general in Nietzsche, see Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “Nietzsche’s Positivism”, \textit{European Journal of Philosophy} 12, no. 3 (2004). In contemporary philosophy such positions are often associated with Donald Davidson (see, for example, Donald Davidson, “Mental Events”, in \textit{Essays on Actions and Events} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980)).

\textsuperscript{38} In my “Honest Illusions” I give other textual reasons for thinking that it is implausible to ascribe such subjective realisms to Nietzsche.
Oddly enough Reginster does not explicitly see the problem created by the open-question argument for the reading that takes Nietzsche as following Schopenhauer closely. Instead he considers the following worry for this account:

In defining values in terms of desires, it does not so much explain the normativity of values as it explains it away, for it appears to erase all meaningful difference between merely feeling inclined toward an end and judging that we ought to pursue it. There is, of course, a difference between having a desire for something and believing that that something satisfies a desire of mine, but I take the real worry to be that our value judgements, according to this theory, no longer play any critical role in assessing our desires.

Reginster attempts to modify the simple reductionist view by picking up on what he takes to be suggestions in the following passage from the *Will to Power*:

The whole conception of an order of rank among the passions: as if the right and normal thing were for one to be guided by reason—with the passions as abnormal, dangerous, semi-animal, and, moreover, so far as their aim is concerned, nothing other than desires for pleasure—

Passion is degraded (1) as if it were only in unseemly cases, and not necessarily and always, the motive force; (2) in as much as it has for its object something of no great value, amusement—

The misunderstanding of passion and reason, as if the latter were an independent entity and not rather a system of relations between various passions and desires; and as if every passion did not possess its quantum of reason— (WP 387)

Reginster reads this as suggesting “that a desire can be ‘ranked’ according to the ‘relations’ it bears with the rest of our ‘desires and passions’. Unfortunately,” Reginster continues, Nietzsche “does not specify what sort of relations he has in mind. But desires with better relations, so to speak, than other desires with which they conflict would have a higher normative ranking, and thus would stand to them as what I ought to do against what I am ‘merely’ inclined to do”.

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40 In the end, I would argue, this objection, once fully spelled out, will not actually turn out to be that far from what was at the heart of the open-question argument anyway.

Now, I have to admit, that I do not quite see how WP 387 is evidence for ascribing to Nietzsche such a theory (what to make of it instead is a good question of course). Perhaps more importantly, any such attempt to add on to the simple reductive picture faces a fundamental dilemma. Either this additional material, these supposed relations that determine the rank of desires, are themselves non-normative—clearly naturalistically respectable psychological relations, say—or they are normative and evaluative relations. If the former, then we still have a reduction to the psychological that faces the open-question argument and does not give Reginster what he wants, namely, the idea that our evaluative judgements are somehow interpretations of the world from the standpoint of our affects. If the latter, then we do not know whether we actually have an alternative to normative objectivism. Just the fact that the truth of evaluative claims depends in part on our desires does not settle this. That was the point of the discussion of coveting. Thus no viable alternative to normative objectivism yet. Round 4 to the fictionalist.

4. Normative Subjectivism and Internalism

When we turn to Reginster’s discussions of the justification of evaluative judgments, I think we finally come to see why no plausible account of normative subjectivism will be forthcoming. Recall that Reginster thinks that the discussions of metaethics are important because they help us see what kind of justification will be needed for the actual revaluation of power later in his book. When he turns to this issue in Chapter 4, he seems to think that what he calls “(Humean) motivational internalism” provides a strategy for establishing the value of power that “fits in with normative subjectivism”. He suggests that he is simply deploying a standard metaethical principle and indeed the following definition that he gives fits with standard metaethical usage: “something cannot be valuable for an agent unless the agent is capable of

42 Reginster, Affirmation, 75.

43 Reginster, Affirmation, 150-51 and 57.
caring about or desiring it”. So construed it is merely a necessary condition on something being valuable for an agent. The principle constrains our story of the nature of the relevant evaluative facts but does not provide such a story. And so construed it is completely compatible with normative objectivism.\(^\text{45}\)

Somehow, as far as I can see, Reginster manages to confuse motivational internalism with a very different claim, or set of claims. He writes, “This principle, together with the claim that human beings do desire power, would lead to the conclusion that power is a good”. But this is just to confuse a necessary condition with a sufficient one. And, I suspect that this confusion also lies behind the following statement made just after the definition of internalism quoted above:

The normative authority of a value judgment therefore depends on contingent psychological features of the agent to whom it is addressed, such as his needs and desires, his patterns of affective response, and his inherited “moral prejudices” (GS 380) or “a particular spiritual level of prevalent judgments” (WP 254), all of which form his evaluative perspective.\(^\text{47}\)


\(^{45}\) After all Plato is arguably a good example of such an internalist. Perhaps I am not taking the label “Humean” seriously and it is true that when Reginster first uses the label “motivational internalism” he gives what might be a stronger version of it: “an agent has a reason to act only if she has a desire that will be served or furthered by her so acting” (151). This is stronger if the agent has to have the desire already and cannot acquire it through deliberation. Indeed, in the ensuing discussion Reginster seems to require that it be a “preexisting desire” (151). In any case, my more general points in the body of the text are not affected.

\(^{46}\) Reginster, Affirmation, 151. For an attempt to reconstruct, and then criticize, this kind of argument—what Leiter calls the “Millian Model” in light of its apparent resemblance to John Stuart Mill’s argument for the principle of utility—on the behalf of other Nietzsche interpreters, see Brian Leiter, Nietzsche’s Metaethics: Against the Privilege Readings, European Journal of Philosophy 8, no. 3 (2000): 281-87.

\(^{47}\) Reginster, Affirmation, 155.
A couple of points. As I just argued in the previous round, that a desire is a necessary condition for the truth of some normative claim does not tell us what all makes the claim true. Thus, for all that has been said, the normative authority of the value judgment, even if motivational internalism is true, depends as much on my contingent psychological features as the judgment that Nadeem is a bad person depended on my coveting. In other words, for all that has been said, it does not depend on my psychological features in any way that represents an alternative to normative objectivism.

Furthermore, notice how in that last quote there is quite a slide from desires to full-blown evaluative and normative judgments. That dependency is not part of standard-issue motivational internalism and particularly not part of one that has the tag “Humean” added up front. But even if we threw those in we would not yet have an alternative to normative objectivism. Think back to my coveting example. No doubt if I believe that I should just ignore my father now that he has spent all his money and has none left for me, I am not exactly doing a stunning job at living up to, this time, the Fifth Commandment.

What Reginster is really thinking of here, I suspect, is internalism in the epistemic sense. It is important to see that internalism in this sense does not follow from motivational internalism. There are large stretches of the book that are meant to be articulations of normative subjectivism that are best read as part of an extended defence of some form of epistemic internalism. That is to say, he argues for a particular account of the norms that should govern our practices of justifying normative judgements. Here is how he puts the view at one point:

It is rational to challenge a judgment … [to ask for its justification,] only if there actually are substantiated reasons to consider it questionable … . Given that these reasons are rooted in other commitments the agent happens to have, it is a purely contingent matter whether this agent actually has such reasons, and therefore whether a given value judgment is fully justified or not.48

These thoughts are then the basis of Reginster’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism that, I take it, is part of normative subjectivism. But I am not sure that Reginster is bearing

48 Reginster, Affirmation, 81.
fully in mind his own earlier warning not to confuse nihilism as disorientation with scepticism.\textsuperscript{49} Normative objectivism is a claim about what our judgements are about—what kinds of facts are required in order for them to be true. Arguments from explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony are then used to show that there are no such facts. All of this is quite compatible with the above-proposed epistemic norms for justification. After all it is the semantic and ontological claims that constitute the error theory that will undermine the agent’s value judgments. Of course, it is a contingent matter whether any particular agent accepts the error theory and thus a contingent matter whether any particular agent’s evaluative judgements will be undermined. Nonetheless, this theory of justification does not do anything to counter the threat of disorientation since that threat is only faced by those who accept the error theory in the first place and this perspectivist, internalist theory of justification, for all that has been said so far, does nothing to undermine the semantic and metaphysical claims that constitute the error theory.

We get closer to something that might when we consider Reginster’s response to someone that asks how the agent’s perspective itself is justified. Reginster responds:

I might raise questions about some aspects of the perspective, and answer them by invoking other aspects of it. We may not, on the other hand, raise wholesale questions about the justification of a perspective. Thus, I may not gather up all the components of my perspective, and ask, from the outside as it were, whether I should subscribe to them in the first place. This question is incoherent, for I lose my grip on what would even count as an answer to it. As soon as I leave my perspective, I deprive myself of the terms in which not only to answer, but also to raise, questions about justification.\textsuperscript{50}

However, the standard-issue naturalistic error theorist does rely on, so to speak, an aspect of his perspective to make his semantic and ontological claims about a different aspect. He does not try to leave all aspects behind. To put the point in more familiar terms, he takes up the

\textsuperscript{49} Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 25-27.

\textsuperscript{50} Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 82.
theoretical perspective on his evaluative practices.\textsuperscript{51} Nietzsche, like any error theorist, would grant that much is required before one is in a position to defend an error theory.\textsuperscript{52}

What Reginster needs is a view that is often pushed by the metaethical malcontents mentioned already, namely, that there is a deep mistake in thinking that our moral practices can be approached in anything like a spirit of scientific, theoretical investigation—in the spirit of, for example, empirically minded linguistic or anthropological investigators. Slogan: there is no “sideways-on view” of our moral practices. As I argue elsewhere, it is very hard to make sense of such views let alone find compelling arguments for them.\textsuperscript{53} Reginster has not, as I have suggested above, succeeded in articulating why such side-on views are impossible. As with the other views of the metaethical malcontents, their embattled status hardly forces us to ascribe them to Nietzsche on grounds of charity. The textual evidence in Nietzsche’s case is also hardly supportive. After all, Nietzsche again and again seems to be happy to make claims about all our evaluative judgements from what surely looks precisely like an empirically minded linguistic and anthropological perspective.\textsuperscript{54}

In this context, Reginster points to Nietzsche’s admittedly puzzling statements about the value of life. Here are the central passages:

\begin{quote}
A condemnation of life by the living remains in the end a mere symptom of a certain kind of life: the question whether it is justified or unjustified is not even raised thereby. One would require a position \textit{outside} of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} As Nietzsche would be the first to insist, we have multiple perspectives within us. It is indeed our will to truth, a contingent fact about us, that leads us to the conclusions of the error theory that in turn undermine our evaluative judgments. Of course, if I was allowed no “perspective”, “perspectives” I would say, from which to begin my investigations, then no doubt it is true that I could not come to the error theory.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Pace} some thinkers, even the practical inescapability of any particular normative judgement will not do much. This, if anything, will be grist to the fictionalist’s mill.

\textsuperscript{53} Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “Norms in Action: Metaethics and the Neo-Kantian Critique”, MS.

\textsuperscript{54} For example: \textit{HH} I: P: 6; \textit{GS} 299, 301; \textit{TI} “Improvers” 1; \textit{WP} 262. Many of these are precisely the passages that Reginster brought in to support the ascription of normative objectivism to Nietzsche in the first place and they are precisely the ones that still need to be explained away, as I argued in Round One.
as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the value of life: reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life [reden wir unter der Inspiration, unter der Optik des Lebens]: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. From this it follows that even that anti-natural morality which conceives of God as the counter-concept and condemnation of life is only a value judgment of life—but of what life? Of what kind of life? I have already given the answer: of declining, weakened, weary, condemned life (TI “Morality” 5).

Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms ... in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one's fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, that the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party ... and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason (TI “Socrates” 2).

Now Reginster wants to use these passages to defend an ascription of some version of the view I have been criticizing above. He does this by making the following claim:

[I]t is necessary to remember that the “life” whose value cannot be judged designates here the perspective from which evaluation alone is possible, and not life as a sequence of events and experiences, which can of course always be the proper object of an evaluation. Judgments about the value of life must here be understood to be judgments about life as the perspective. Such judgments require stepping “outside” of this perspective, which makes evaluation simply impossible.55

But I have to say that I just do not see this in the passages quoted. It seems clear to me that, in fact, Nietzsche is talking about life as the usual sequences of events and experiences. Both passages suggest some kind of epistemic bias—an interested optic—generated by living or by the particular kind of life one is living. This plus our inability to “know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it”—in other words our inability to have enough information—prevents us from being in a position to come to any justifiable conclusion about it. Reading the rejection of side-on views into these passages just seems a real stretch.

55 Reginster, Affirmation, 83.
Thus Reginster’s discussions of the nature of justification also do not present us with an articulated, philosophically or textually plausible, version of normative subjectivism. Round Five to the fictionalist.\footnote{I have ignored various fancier metaethical possibilities, like non-cognitivist or response-dependent views that would have made the dialectic of this paper more complicated. My main excuse for ignoring them is that Reginster does not explicitly bring them up. For all I have argued here, some interpretation of Nietzsche along one of these lines might both capture the spirit of Reginster’s normative subjectivism and be a plausible interpretation of Nietzsche. For one attempt at ascribing non-cognitivism to Nietzsche, see Maudemarie Clark, “Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity: The Development of Nietzsche’s Metaethics”, in \textit{Nietzsche and Morality}, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). For some general worries about non-cognitivist readings of Nietzsche, see Hussain, “Honest Illusion”, 160 n. 6.}

\section{Fictionalism}

I will conclude with a discussion of one of Reginster’s central objections to fictionalism. Fictionalism is “of no help against nihilistic despair”. He writes:

Supposing, then, that all moralities are games of make-believe, it seems as though one is as good as any other. If the functional role of a morality … is to give our life a sense of purpose or direction, for example, the old Christian morality should do as well as any other. … Their fictional character alone can therefore not explain [Nietzsche’s] insistence that the old Christian values are harmful, that we ought to reject them and adopt new values in their stead.\footnote{Reginster, \textit{Affirmation}, 100.}

Two things. First, it is not actually clear that Nietzsche needs to think that Christian morality would survive the transition to a fictionalist simulacra. I suspect there will have to be some differences between believing and make-believing in order to ground ascriptions of make-belief as opposed to belief.\footnote{Hussain, “Honest Illusion”.} Reginster himself quotes, a couple of pages earlier, a nice passage that suggests what these differences might be for Nietzsche:

Precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings […], we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us. It would mean a relapse for us, with our irritable honesty, to get involved entirely in morality and, for the sake of the over-severe demands that we make on ourselves in these matters, to become virtuous monsters and scarecrows. We should be able also to stand above morality—and not only to stand with
the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also
to float above it and play.\(^{59}\)

Or as Nietzsche puts it in the preface to the *Gay Science*:

> In the end, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such
> severe sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one’s skin, more
> ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all
> good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more
> childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before. (GS P:4)

These passages capture the light, mocking, playfulness that, I suggest, would tend to be part of
a fictionalist practice—or that at least Nietzsche might reasonably think would. Whether the
seriousness of guilt and indignation, indeed the seriousness of Christian morality as a whole, is
compatible with this playfulness is not obvious.

Second, if the agent feels despair, then she is motivated to do something about it. As long
as she still believes that suffering is bad, then despair may only move her to give up on life. But
if, thanks to the error theory, she no longer *believes* that suffering is bad, then the despair that
might come with the pretence that suffering is bad is surely itself a motivation to create a
different honest illusion, perhaps precisely the one that Reginster recommends, namely,
regarding suffering as good. Of course, the fictionalist cannot really claim that the agent ought
to so revalue and this seems to be Reginster’s objection. This, I want to end by suggesting,
should really be quite surprising. Through much of his book, Reginster bemoans, on the behalf
of normative subjectivism, our unwillingness to take seriously the motivational states that
constitute our contingent psychologies. Our fictionalist now points out that those in despair, as
a matter of their contingent psychologies, will be motivated to adopt a fictionalist revaluation
of suffering. The contingent motivation is all there is to it. No need for oughts or reasons. In the
end, it is in fact Reginster who fails to take our contingent motivations seriously and clings on
to the trappings of rationalism in a most unNietzschean way.\(^{60}\)

\(^{59}\) GS 107; quoted at Reginster, *Affirmation*, 95.

\(^{60}\) My thanks to Maudemarie Clark and Bernard Reginster for extended discussions. I am
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Works Cited


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