

# The Affirmation of Life: A Moral Genealogy Perspective on Life and Its Implications

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## Abstract

With the rapid development of modern times, contemporary bioethics increasingly faces various challenges. These include the insufficient grounding of mainstream value theories in universality, and an overly abstract understanding of concepts such as life, suffering, and health. This paper argues that Nietzsche's moral genealogy can offer valuable insights for contemporary bioethics to reflect on these issues. To better illustrate this point, the first two chapters examine the critiques and stances of moral genealogy. On one hand, they explore the moral genealogy's critique of traditional morality's life-denying practices. On the other hand, they summarize the life-affirming viewpoints and stances that emerge in the moral genealogy's critique. Building on this foundation, the final chapter clarifies that the contributions of moral genealogy to contemporary bioethics are threefold. First, moral genealogy's dynamic understanding of life's generative nature offers a counterpoint to contemporary bioethics' static treatment of life as an abstraction. Second, the moral genealogy's concept of "pleasing suffering" encourages contemporary bioethics to more openly acknowledge the inevitable suffering associated with life. Third, moral genealogy's dynamic view of health provides a perspective to reconsider the static view of health in contemporary bioethics.

## Keywords

Affirmation of Life, Life-Denying, Moral Genealogy, Bioethics

## 1. Introduction

Moral genealogy primarily refers to Nietzsche's moral critical approach to morality and method as presented in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. It signifies both a reorientation of Nietzsche's approach to the concept of genealogy and a founda-

tional reflection on life and its treatment. Unlike preceding moral historians, Nietzsche dismisses the metaphysical understanding of life as a mere perspective that should not be confused with life itself. In his view, life is inherently perspectival, inherently emphasizing change and plurality. Elevating a single perspective to the status of absolute objective existence, in his opinion, is equivalent to denying life itself. Consequently, Nietzsche critiqued traditional morality, which is deeply rooted in metaphysics, and reinterpreted moral issues as empirical problems (Ye, 2002). He stressed the importance of understanding and affirmation of life from diverse emotional perspectives, advocating for the experience of pain and the expression of emotions in harmony with life's instincts. Moral genealogy, grounded in a reflection on life itself, not only challenges the supremacy of traditional morality but also offers significant insights for contemporary bioethics.

## **2. Refusal to Deny Life: Moral Genealogy's Criticism of Traditional Morality**

Nietzsche's moral genealogy, critiquing traditional morality, primarily targets its denial of life as a central flaw. This traditional morality, as analyzed by Nietzsche, comprises two main components. The first is the Christian morality that has dominated Europe for thousands of years. This moral system constructs a divine order based on faith and imposes it upon people as absolute commands. The second component is modern scientific rationalism, which prioritizes the development of universal principles grounded in empirical science and governed by reason. Nietzsche views these two components as fundamentally similar in their origin of will and internal logic; both perpetuate the metaphysical value of Platonism. These values obstruct the instinct of life and hinder individual development, essentially amounting to a denial of life that has long remained unchallenged. Driven by his concern for life and practical considerations, Nietzsche critically scrutinized and questioned this traditional "value of morality" (Nietzsche, 2018).

First, Nietzsche argues that traditional morality misconstrues life by tracing its origins to a "wrong" will, specifically, a weak will that denies life. He categorizes human into the "strong" and the "weak" based on the vigor of their life forces. The strong, brimming with vitality, signify life's robustness, while the weak exhausted and feeble, embody life's frailty. This difference in strength leads to distinct attitudes towards the expression of power. Nietzsche likens the strong to predatory raptors, ever-seeking expansion and aggression, in contrast to the weak, resembling lambs focused solely on survival. However, the weak's retreat doesn't entirely prevent power confrontations with the strong. The expansion and aggression of the strong inevitably seek targets, whether other strong entities or the weak. In encounters with the former, who are themselves powerful and battle-ready, confrontations are accepted, and even in defeat, they can swiftly recover and rebound. Conversely, the weak, often harmed and intimidated by

such confrontations, accumulate loss and resentment. This resentment morphs into an animosity towards the strong. In an attempt to counteract and protect themselves, the weak forge a value system antithetical to the strength of life force. In this system, “good” is defined as that which is scarce and powerless, and “evil” as the rapacious and conquering (Nietzsche, 2018). Under such a value regime, people gradually develop an aversion to sensuality and seek to suppress and ostracize the expression of life force.

According to Nietzsche, traditional morality effectively denies the value of life. Since the time of Plato, the world has been divided into a true world of ideas and the false world of sensibility, the latter being subordinated and despised under the rule of reason. Christian morality later incorporated Plato’s dichotomy into its religious doctrines, envisioning a blissful, pain-free heavenly realm above the earthly one. To reach this realm, it preached the practice of asceticism in the secular world. Asceticism, in this context, requires minimizing life’s basic sensations and desires, avoid everything that arouses emotions or “blood” (Nietzsche, 2018). This means suppressing sensual impulses to the utmost. This tradition of rejecting sensuality has persisted into modern times. Nietzsche observes that in modern science, although the concept of God has been discarded, reason has taken up the mantle once held by God. People may not look to God for the meaning of existence anymore, but they do seek truth. In Nietzsche’s eyes, this relentless pursuit of truth is itself a belief in the ascetic ideal (Nietzsche, 2018). Sensibility is still relegated to the background, dominated and suppressed by reason. But how does this suppression of sensibility equate to the denial of life? Nietzsche argues that sensual impulses are the most fundamental and central instincts of life; life is a force of constant impulse, will, and action (Nietzsche, 2018). Inhibiting sensuality actually means denying the expression of life’s instincts, and thus, denying life itself. Therefore, the traditional morality that enforces the will of the weak, though seemingly just ruling over and suppressing sensuality with faith or reason, in reality, with faith or reason, in reality, inflicts harm on life itself, It is a “poisoning of the blood”, a “contamination of the very flesh of all humanity” (Nietzsche, 2018).

Second, Nietzsche argues that traditional morality, with its basis in metaphysics, misunderstands life and its emphasis on certain values is obstructive. He contends that traditional morality erroneously dichotomizes the world into essences and phenomena. It views generation merely as a manifestation of life, positing that behind these appearance lies an external substratum, free to act or not (Nietzsche, 2018). Consequently, the release of power, generation, and flow are dismissed as arbitrary and irrelevant to the true nature of life. Nietzsche vehemently opposes this view, asserting that “there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the act, the action, the generation; the “doer” is merely a construct, and the act itself is paramount” (Nietzsche, 2018). He argues that generation is not just an essential act of life but is fundamentally inseparable from life, revealing itself through this very process. In contrast, traditional morality’s re-

presentational approach not only diminishes the value of generation but also amounts to a denial of life itself. Additionally, traditional morality holds a biased view against the suffering inherent in the process of generation. In Christian morality, suffering is seen as a punishment for life. Due to the perceived debt to Jesus, human beings must endure suffering and practice as compensation. In this view, pain is the antithesis of life, with its alleviation leading towards an afterlife in Elysium, seen as “a sacred form of indulgence to combat slow pain and boredom” (Nietzsche, 2018). Nietzsche criticizes this approach, arguing that Christian morality overlooks the positive of pain in life’s growth. Its fundamental goal of accepting pain is ironically to escape pain and suppress the will to live.

On the other hand, Nietzsche argues that traditional morality impedes and weakens the development of life’s diversity. He notes that metaphysics, in its attempts to explain the generation and change of things, is overly focused on establishing an absolute, magical origin for things from the core and essence of their very nature (Nietzsche, 2008). Both the apocalyptic truth of Christian morality and the rational truth of modern science are viewed as absolutely identical in existence. This notion of sameness originates from the metaphysical belief in a singular perspective. Nietzsche posits that life is essentially perspectival, and any understanding of it is merely a limited perspective. However, metaphysics often treats the outcome of a single perspective as absolute objectivity, “dismissing all the loose ends, all the schemes and disguises that ought to be considered external and accidental,” and is keen to “strip away all the masks to ultimately reveal an originating sameness” (Foucault, 2003). Consequently, the contingencies and deviations of origin are homogenized and erased by the dominant faith and reason. The life defined by this origin is thus deprived of its potential for generation. Therefore, moral genealogy uncovers the truth about the origin of traditional morality. It reveals the actual nature of origin through true historical investigation, showing that history and origin are inherently scattered and contingent. It further demonstrates that the convergence of life is an impossibility (Prescott-Couch, 2015), and that any trend towards homogenization is nothing but a denial of the diverse nature life itself.

Overall, the critique of traditional by moral genealogy is, in fact, a reflection on metaphysical discourse and logic. It refutes the denial of the value of life and affirms life’s perspectival nature and its state of generation and flow. As Nietzsche emphasized, values must be evaluated from the perspective of life, considering whether they hinder or promote the flourishing of life (Nietzsche, 2018). Traditional morality, as a set of values, implements the will to assimilate life within the continuity of history and, as such, cannot genuinely promote the flourishing of life. According to Nietzsche, the fundamental reason people still adhere to these values today is due to a fear of an existence devoid of meaning. Regardless of their circumstances, people always need purpose and direction to move forward. “Rather than will nothing, one prefers to will nothingness” (Nietzsche, 2018). People prefer to trade the denial of life for the constant sense

of clear meaning rather than live in confusion. Nietzsche, clearly not in favor of such a situation, offers a different path through his critique of traditional morality. Moral genealogy also thus presents a way for people, a way of “affirmation of life”.

### **3. Affirmation of Life: The Core Position of Moral Genealogy**

The “affirmation of life” represents not only the central position of moral genealogy but also offers a new interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspective on the relationship between value and life. While the concept of affirming life is not original to Nietzsche, he posits it as a prerequisite for all values to justify their existence. To be recognized and accepted, values must demonstrate their capacity to affirm life, which itself is grounded in an understanding of life. Consequently, the primary challenge facing moral theory is how to affirm life. Metaphysics, for instance, perceives life as an essentially unified rational entity. To affirm life in this context means to acknowledge the absolute status of reason, thereby prioritizing the differences and contingencies of life. However, moral genealogy’s approach to affirming life diverges from this metaphysical understanding.

First, moral genealogy perceives life as the will to power, which fundamentally seeks the release of power. Nietzsche posits that the world is a web of power relations, stating, “the quantity of force (Kraft-Quanta), by its very nature, consists in this: the exertion of power over all the other quantities of force” (Nietzsche, 2006). Hence, any one force is invariably in antagonistic relations with other forces, and the release of power is intrinsically linked with antagonism. However, unlike the metaphysical view where life passively avoids force confrontations, moral genealogy envisions life’s essence as desiring confrontation, as an active will to power responding to these force relationships. This will to power engages in confrontation either by conquering or being conquered by another force (Dawson, 2023). However, this subjugation should not be misconstrued with negative connotations like control or domination. As Deleuze argues, interpreting the will to power as a desire for control necessitates reliance on established metaphysical values, which typically seek dominance in conflicting power relations (Deleuze, 2020). The will to power, instead, aims not at domination or assimilation into power relations but at creation and growth. The purpose of its confrontation is the growth of its own power. Through such confrontation, the will to power gains an accumulated power, and when this accumulation reaches a peak, it naturally seeks to release it, i.e., to consume itself through confrontation again, thereby making space for further accumulation (Wang, 2008). For Nietzsche, it is in this continuous cycle of accumulation and release, in the very process of confrontation, that life is truly revealed. To “affirm life” means, above all, to affirm the instinctive impulses of life, embracing the release of life’s power through confrontation.

Confrontation inevitably entails suffering, so the “affirmation of life” in moral genealogy also encompasses the acceptance of suffering. Nietzsche perceives

pain as inherently intertwined with life. Although pain is not always beneficial for life, it remains a part of its organic whole, and its outright elimination is undesirable (McIntyre, 2016). Moral genealogy rejects the interpretation of suffering as a mere sin, as traditional morality often does. Instead, it posits that suffering does not inherently possess a constant quality of good or bad. Suffering can be justifiably rejected when it is framed within the context of sin, but should also be accepted when it is an essential component of life's growth. Moral genealogy primarily views suffering as the latter, placing it within the realm of pure experience. Life, as the will to power that is constantly in confrontation, embodies not only the will to overcome resistance but also the will to create it. This resistance, the locus of unavoidable pain in the process of the releasing life's power, is also vital for life's growth. Hence, affirming life necessitates accepting the objective existence of pain and recognizing its intrinsic value. Nietzsche's observation that Christian morality is "almost entirely free from a deep disdain against itself, against the earth, against all life, and that they make themselves as miserable as possible for the sake of enjoying pain" (Nietzsche, 2018) is more a critique of the rejection of pain than its acceptance. In contrast, moral genealogy's acceptance of suffering is profound, finding delight in the inevitable pain and affirmation life itself.

Secondly, in moral genealogy, the "affirmation of life" is expressed through values, necessitating a shift from homogenizing thought to a pluralistic perspective. Nietzsche perceives life as the will to power. However, the movement of this will is directed outwardly, and the resulting release of power is diffusive and irregular, lacking a constant and absolute goal. This release signifies generation, emblematic of diversity and difference, where homogenization finds no place in its "generative nature" (Nietzsche, 2006). Consequently, for values to affirm life, they must first embrace openness and plurality in their perspective. This is why moral genealogy opts to interpret life through the lens of emotional perspective. Emotions, as explored in moral genealogy, are typically those directly produced by the body, manifesting as complex psychological and physiological state. Nietzsche's focus on the affective perspective stems from the close connection between emotional release and life's essence. Since this release is propelled by the will to power, understanding life, or the will to power itself, largely depends on our comprehension of emotions (Fowles, 2020). Nietzsche believes that emotions can create causal connections between individual states and their environments. Even under the dominance of rational discourse, individuals can engage in self-reflection through emotional understanding, thus gaining insights into their own conditions and peculiarities. Regarding values, the diversity and variability of emotions allow them to break free from the homogenization trap in life interpretation.

On this foundation, moral genealogy's "affirmation of life" upholds a pluralistic openness extending from values to life itself. The affective perspective enables moral genealogy to focus on the immediate aspects: the physical body, the nerv-

ous system, nutritional and digestive systems, and various energies. As Foucault notes, “It does not shy away from looking downward, but it looks down, deeper, in order to grasp the various landscapes, to show the dispersions and the distinctions” (Foucault, 2003). This dynamic exploration of difference means that moral genealogy’s understanding of life doesn’t crystallize into a single absolute constant. It does not hinder life’s generative changes but rather revolutionizes life understanding as it evolves. Nietzsche sought this harmonious unity of thought and life: “One step forward in life, one step forward in thought. The mode of life inspires the mode of thought; the mode of thought creates the mode of life. Life inspires thought, and then it is the turn of thought to affirm life” (Deleuze, 2020). It is in this unity that the true affirmation of life is realized. Thus, in moral genealogy, understanding and treating life with regard to its affirmation are practically synonymous. A flawed understanding of life leads to nihilism and fails to contribute to life’s flourishing. However, moral genealogy’s “affirmation of life” largely remains at the theoretical level and does not develop into conducive to life. This aspect makes the bioethical reflections of moral genealogy more challenging to apply in practice.

Overall, the “affirmation of life” aspect of genealogy is both thorough and open. In its form, genealogy perceives the essence of life as the will to power. This conceptual framework might seem like a return to metaphysics, but in reality, it is not. Nietzsche fundamentally rejects the discourse and perspective of metaphysics. In metaphysical systems, language and logic are traditionally dominated by the concept of “is”, leading to the elimination of life’s contingent meaning and its replacement by an absolute commitment to uniformity. However the will to power, though it represents essence, is not a mere conformist in the sense of metaphysical abstraction. It is also an appearance. In fact, the will to power is the sole appearance: “there is nothing external to the will to power, the will to power is not something hidden behind things, it does not need a visible movement and a visible world to be expressed; likewise, ...the will to power is not subordinate to any object or subject!” (Wang, 2008). Therefore, the moral genealogical understanding of life is fundamentally distinct from metaphysics perspectives. Furthermore, the emotional perspective places moral genealogy in direct opposition to metaphysics. The focus on sensibility and diversity greatly enhances the creative vitality of life. This ethical progression not only helped Nietzsche in completing the affirmation of life but also holds significant revelatory importance contemporary bioethics.

#### **4. Moral Genealogy’s Implications for Contemporary Bioethics**

Moral genealogy addresses the core issue of bioethics: how to understand and treat life. With the advancement of life sciences and biotechnology, along with their practical applications, modern medicine has increasingly gained the capability to intervene in human life. Moral genealogy provides crucial insights into

how we should view life and make value judgments, particularly regarding issues of pain and health.

Firstly, the dynamic understanding of life's generative nature in moral genealogy prompts a reflection on the static and abstract treatment of life in contemporary bioethics. Contemporary bioethics represents a system, with varying insights across different theories about the concept of life; while there is no one single standard definition, there exists a common approach in understanding life. It is often defined as the systematic study of human behavior within the life sciences and health care, guided by moral values and principles (Qiu, 2009). Three main theories underpin contemporary bioethics: utilitarianism, deontology, and natural law. Utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of actions, deontology on the motives behind actions, and natural law theory on aspects such as self-preservation and species reproduction. A common thread among these theories is their establishment of certain absolute values (such as consequences, motives, and natural laws) as moral constants in the abstract understanding of life. In the prevalent principlism of contemporary bioethics, life is implicitly considered a being uniformly regulated by universal principles. However, the principle theory in principlism is merely an abstract representation of Western values and lacks absolute commonality and universality. Nietzsche perceives life as a purely diffuse will to power, beyond rigid categorization. The universalization and unification sought in principlism overlook the inherent diversity of life. As a form of affective perspectivism, moral genealogy closely aligns value judgments with empirical examinations of life, highlighting the importance of understanding life and individual behavior from multiple perspectives. It aids contemporary bioethics and principlism in reflecting on their issues of abstraction and staticity.

Secondly, the concept of "pleasing pain" in moral genealogy has positive implications for contemporary bioethics. The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defines pain as unpleasant sensory and emotional experiences associated with, or described in terms of, actual or potential tissue damage. Contemporary bioethics often views pain as a symptom of an underlying disease and as a neurological indication that there may be an issue with life (Ten Have & Neves, 2021). In other words, pain is perceived as a life-threatening presence, a state from which escape is desperately needed. For instance, euthanasia is sometimes seen as the correct choice, regarded as the only escape from pain in certain situations. This judgment merely echoes the conclusion that it offers a way out of pain (Qiu, 2009). However, pain is not always synonymous with disease or a precursor to potential illness, and the absence of pain is not necessarily indicative of good health. In many cases, pain signals the rise and growth of life. For example, muscle soreness from lactic acid production after exercise is indicative of a trend toward physical strength. Nietzsche posits that the affirmation of life lies in positively enhancing life, not merely in its negative preservation. Pain, as an essential aspect of life's growth, can be mitigated as



much as possible, but this does not imply that pain should be completely avoided or rejected; more often, it is necessary to confront and embrace the pain that is an inherent part of life's growth.

Finally, moral genealogy's dynamic understanding of the concept of health offers a valuable perspective on the static view of health in contemporary bioethics. Contemporary bioethics categorizes health into three main types: naturalistic, normative, and integrative. Naturalism regards health as an objective state, exemplified by the normal functioning of body organs. Normativism, in contrast, sees health as a value concept reliant on individual goals, plans, and aspirations in various contexts, and as a personal characteristic that can only be fully understood from a social perspective (Ten Have & Neves, 2021). Synthesisism, combining naturalistic and normative views, is reflected in the World Health Organization's definition of health, which encompasses not only the absence of disease and infirmity but also complete physical, mental, and social well-being. While naturalism and normativism are essentially static in their prescriptions (e.g., natural or social functioning), Nietzsche argued that health, like life, is not a fixed and unchanging state, but rather a generative process. Similarly, while integrism expands the concept of health, it still tends to view disease as health's antithesis. Conversely, Nietzsche posits that disease and health are not in absolute opposition; health is fundamentally a state that includes, contends with, and can even triumphs over disease. "Health is not even close to illness, and needs illness as a means and hook for gaining awareness" (Nietzsche, 2008). From the moral genealogical perspective, health is an overflowing force for shaping and healing, such as the dispersal of low moods by the strong. Health is not merely the state of being free from sickness and pain, but rather the continual process of rising from sickness and pain, fighting back, a powerful testament to one's faith in the ability to recover and regain vitality.

Overall, the significance of moral genealogy in contemporary times lies in its critical nature, yet it also possesses the limitation of being relatively weak in construction. Moral genealogy interprets human behaviors and apparent motives as various expressions of the will to power (Soll, 2015). While this interpretation aligns with the diversity of life, it does not significantly contribute to the construction of life. This lack of constructive approach might be seen as either an intentional outcome of moral genealogy or an inevitable result of its focus on pluralism and openness. Nonetheless, this approach contributes to the absence of a concrete framework of moral norms within moral genealogy. What moral genealogy reveals about contemporary bioethics and principlism is more of a theoretical critique than a practical standard. However, the ethical reflections offered by moral genealogy can enable individuals to make informed choices that avoid potential neglect or indifference to their own lives and the lives of others, which can stem from blind adherence to certain absolute principles. Therefore, discussing moral genealogy's insights into contemporary bioethics should not be viewed as a total rejection of the latter or a blind faith in the former. Instead, it

should be considered a reflective perspective that can help contemporary bioethics overcome its own dilemma.

## 5. Conclusion

In modern society, which is rapidly developing in science and technology, rationality remains dominant. People operate within various rational norms, and often, individual uniqueness and emotional expression are overshadowed by the larger discourse systems. Nietzsche, in the preface of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, highlights this by stating, “we do not yet know ourselves, and we, the knowers, do not yet know ourselves” (Nietzsche, 2018). We tend to be fixated on established knowledge and values, yet we do not sufficiently scrutinize the flow of life itself. Therefore, understanding life and affirming and promoting it remain crucial challenges that contemporary bioethics cannot ignore. Beginning with a critique of traditional morality, moral genealogy provides a reflection based on life itself. It reveals sensibility beyond reason and plurality beyond unity, exploring value possibilities in affirming and promoting life. This approach aids us in empathizing with the nature of life and value judgments, as well as suffering and health. Thus, moral genealogy is not only a historical product of Nietzsche’s reevaluation of the “value of morality” but also serves as a mirror for contemporary reflection on life.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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