When Friedrich Nietzsche was writing at the end of the 19th century, his ideas were challenging, even revolutionary—he sought to overturn the entire Western metaphysical tradition with his announcement of the death of God, and at the very least succeeded in introducing into Western consciousness the possibility that Platonism in all its forms were wrong. Jean-Paul Sartre began writing a mere forty or so years after Nietzsche went insane, yet the world had changed drastically, and partly due to Nietzsche’s thought. Sartre undoubtedly owes a great debt to Nietzsche, whether he consciously acknowledges it or not. Sartre’s existentialism begins with Nietzsche’s nihilism, and is a reflection of much of Nietzsche’s thought, yet ultimately goes in a different direction.

Each philosopher, as a major part of his work, is trying to face the problem of living a meaningful life in a seemingly meaningless world—what is the individual’s reaction to the loss of a point of reference, the so-called death of God? What are his choices in the face of the abyss? Is it possible to live a meaningful life when no objective meaning or value exists? Nietzsche and Sartre both seem to answer “yes” to this last question, yet offer quite different explanations of the individual’s reaction and what it is that will allow him or her to make meaning for him or herself. Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seem to offer quite different answers than Sartre’s novel, *Nausea*. The difference is love, desire, willing.

I would first like to address the point of why I have chosen these particular texts: with respect to *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, these two texts are not only probably two of Nietzsche’s most well-known and important, they also, together, give an extensive (if unstructured) consideration of the problem of the death of God and what one might do in the face of this event. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is, in one way, an exploration of the ideas presented in *The Gay Science* using quite a different format—a cohesive story styled after the various religious stories of saints and prophets rather than a series of aphorisms-- but in another way, is also a continuation and further development of those ideas. As for Sartre, while he has written numerous texts from which I could have chosen, *Nausea* is one that introduces and develops his basic tenets of existentialism through the vehicle of literature. Why not *Being and Nothingness*, or another of his non-fictional works? Well, by the very fact that he is addressing individual human experience, I felt that that was best shown and explored through the experiences of an individual- his character Roquentin- rather than through a systematic analysis of human being in general. Plus this is a short paper.
In any case, let us first examine the similarities between the two thinkers, the ideas Nietzsche and Sartre both share in order to set a foundation for their ultimate divergence. *The Gay Science* is a pivotal work in Nietzsche’s thought, as it is here that he first introduces the death of God and the idea of eternal recurrence. The death of God, revealed by the madman in Book III, is the death of a way of life, of the western metaphysical tradition, and thus affects not just the religious but everyone. The images the madman uses to describe the consequences of the death of God reveal to the reader the extent to which they reach:

How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?¹

What the madman reveals here is not just that God is dead, but that the consequences are far-reaching—it was God, the Western Christian-Platonic tradition and its belief in Truth, that anchored us and provided the foundation, the reference point, for every aspect of our lives. “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?” We were tied to a source which gave life and meaning and the umbilical cord has now been cut. We float free from any source and are abandoned to our own devices, like a ship at sea that no longer has sight of the shore (another of Nietzsche’s often used metaphors). What this means is that we no longer have an external source for meaning, truth, or value. Whether we should volunteer at church or steal and murder, whether it is better to elect one candidate or another, whether we should feel guilty about stabbing a friend in the back, or even whether a shoe is a shoe; none of these any longer make any sense or have any meaning. When one begins to think about the extent to which his life is based on a hierarchy of values which in turn determine what actions he will take, what goals he will pursue, and in what he finds meaning, it becomes apparent that western civilization (and, in fact, human society in general) is deeply mired in a belief in objective reality. And as the madman says, this deed is too great for us yet to comprehend—

At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of

the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”

It is the very imagery of being unchained and night’s coming on used above by Nietzsche’s madman that seems to be recalled by Sartre in Nausea as his main character, Antoine Roquentin, experiences this lack of meaning, or as Sartre characterizes it, the absurdity of life. Roquentin also experiences, or becomes aware of, a total detachment from any center or source of structure and meaning. As he sits in the park contemplating the roots of a chestnut tree, he states, “I couldn’t remember it was a root anymore. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me.”

The names of things, and even the things themselves, the roots of this chestnut tree for example, become mere sounds and collections of sensory perception with no reference point to give them meaning and coherence. It is as though that which gives this “black, knotty mass” an identity as roots comes only from the human mind, and Roquentin’s mental ability to provide coherence to perception has temporarily failed. There is nothing external to back it up. He moves through the novel feeling alienated- nothing ties him, nothing provides an anchor, a point of reference for him; the things around him lack meaning and coherence, becoming unrecognizable and frightening. He continually comes back to the root of this chestnut tree—“Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me...brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain to repeat: ‘This is root’—it didn’t work any more...This root, with its colour, shape, its congealed movement, was...below all explanation.”

Black? The root was not black, there was no balck on this piece of wood—there was...something else: black, like the circle, did not exist. I looked at the root: was it more than black or almost black? But I soon stopped questioning myself because I had the feeling of knowing where I was. Yes, I had already scrutinized innumerable objects, with deep uneasiness. I had already tried-vainly- to think something about them: and I had already felt their cold, inert qualities elude me, slip through my fingers.

The question taken up by Nietzsche, and later by Sartre, is how do we find meaning and value when there is no external source, no God or “sun” to give it to us? What do we do when a tree root becomes an incoherent mass of perceptions, even the name of which, “root,” means nothing? How do we resist falling

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into despair and resignation at the lack of meaning and direction? Nietzsche and Sartre have both often been accused of nihilism, but for both, this annihilation of meaning is only a starting point. Where does it take us?

I think this is one of the fundamental ways in which Sartre and Nietzsche differ. They both set forth the possibility that there is no meaning or underlying structure, and they both point out the difficulty of accepting such an idea—for neither one of them is this an easy, or even pleasant thing. However, when it comes to the question of what to do with this realization, what an individual’s ultimate response ought to be, or rather, how one might go about finding meaning in such a situation, ultimately, Nietzsche is much more optimistic. He discusses this in terms of health, and love, and joy, whereas Sartre, while he claims that existentialism is a philosophy of optimism, still has a pervasive sense of negativity or pessimism. *The Gay Science vs. Nausea, The Flies, No Exit.* But if more proof is needed, let us take a look at the terms in which each discusses the individual experience of, and possibilities for facing, the abyss.

For Nietzsche, it seems that one potential solution to the problem of meaning is eternal recurrence. Eternal recurrence is introduced in *The Gay Science* and is further explored in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*

*The Greatest weight,—What, if some day or night a dmeon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spake thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?*

Like with almost all Nietzsche, to try to interpret this passage in one way only is impossible, but it is generally taken to refer not necessarily to the literal return of everything given an infinite amount of time,

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but to an attitude voluntarily taken up in the face of the futility indicated by the idea. That is, if it were the case that everything came back to us, that we would experience this life “once more and innumerable times more,” how might we conceive of and live our lives such that it would have meaning and purpose? The key, for Nietzsche, is not the reality, but our disposition towards that reality: “Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” As David Allison states in Reading the New Nietzsche,

Thus, by emphasizing the all-to-apparent loss of this center…, Nietzsche commenced in his task of establishing a “joyful wisdom.” He claimed to do this by investing human existence with the active desire to desire itself, to serve itself in its own name—to joyfully legislate its own human values, vocations, and ends. With this in view, Nietzsche set out to formulate a proposal for an entirely immanent human future, one he conceived under the enigmatic title, “the eternal recurrence.”

With no God, Truth, or “center,” towards what ought one strive? Towards the self, and joyfully.

It is at this point that love, the concept of *amor fati*, or “love of fate,” plays an important part. It is introduced prior to eternal recurrence, but seems to be the kernel around which eternal recurrence is more fully developed. At the beginning of Book IV in The Gay Science, Nietzsche writes,

*For the new year—I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. Sum, ergo cogito; cogito, ergo sum. Today everybody permits himself the expression of his wish and his dearest thought; hence I, too, shall say what it is that I wish from myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year—what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.*

What the term *amor fati* or “love of fate” seems to indicate is that all humans have a fate, that things must necessarily occur as they do, that there are necessities of life over which we have no control and cannot avoid, and that we should accept and even love that which must be. However, it also implies much more than this. Fate here appears to point to those other aspects of life over which we have no control: nature, our past, and ultimately, our humanity and all it implies. Humans are weak, fallible, ever-
changing, susceptible to shame and guilt, but they are also resilient and creative, capable of kindness and forgiveness. We are all these things, yet are constantly asked to suppress some aspects and perfect others. And humans constantly face obstacles to fulfilling their desires, whatever those might be, both internal or external obstacles, whether physical objects, one’s past, a psychological or physical infliction, or another person. Nietzsche accuses the Christian-Platonic tradition of creating a perpetual feeling of dissatisfaction, and even guilt, at being human. One concept Nietzsche continually brings up throughout The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, therefore, is that of acceptance and self-acceptance. This self-acceptance seems to be the ultimate aim, and is reached though an acceptance and embracing of all other things. Amor fati thus in a wider sense points to acceptance and love of the necessary: humans, nature, reality-- all are, and must be, as they are. We must become “Yes-sayers.” Allison states, “…the individual must embrace nature ultimately by an act of will. He must willingly accept the natural order on its own terms. For Nietzsche, this means we must affirm its chaos and necessity…”

A very important question that arises here, and arises also with respect to Sartre, is that of the difference between acceptance, willing things to be as they are, and resignation. Is Nietzsche advocating resignation? Apparently we ought to accept that which cannot be changed, that which is necessary in things; does this not indicate a resigning of oneself? He states in the passage immediately following the introduction of amor fati,

There is a certain high point in life: once we have reached that, we are, for all our freedom, once more in the greatest danger of spiritual unfreedom, and no matter how much we have faced up to the beautiful chaos of existence and denied it all providential reason and goodness, we still have to pass our hardest test. For it is only now that the idea of a personal providence confronts us with the most penetrating force, and the best advocate, the evidence of our eyes, speaks for it—now that we can see how palpably always everything that happens to us turns out for the best.

Is all for the best in this best of all possible worlds? We’ve seen to what ridicule Voltaire subjected that sentiment in Candide. Can Nietzsche possibly be making Candide’s insanely naïve acceptance of all that befalls him a model for his readers? No. To accept and love is not an endpoint; it becomes itself a new beginning, a springboard into a life of self-legislated meaning. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, this “yes-saying” from the amor fati passage is repeated in Zarathustra’s first speech, “On the Three Metamorphoses”, but, I would argue, also demonstrates the idea of this “yes-saying” as a point of beginning rather than an act of resignation. Zarathustra begins by discussing how one must first become a camel, accepting those things that are most difficult, and go into the the desert. In the desert, the second

metamorphosis occurs and one becomes a lion who says “no” to the dragon of accepted values. It is important that Nietzsche, or Zarathustra, goes on to enumerate a third metamorphosis—into the child, the “yes-sayer”—

But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion still become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred “Yes.” For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred “Yes” is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world.11

What is here revealed is the fact that one cannot simply accept the burden, nor can one merely reject what came before; what one must do, after taking on the burden of existence and after rejecting the old values and worldviews, is to take the positive step of beginning again, like the child, and creating anew—saying yes. One must love in the (ironically, perhaps) Socratic/Platonic sense of desiring—desiring what is and must be, and will it to be so. And then go on to live and create because of, or out of, what is, not in spite of it. It is in this way that Nietzsche avoids mere resignation.

For Sartre, although he pays lip service in several works to the optimism of existentialism by virtue of the fact that it means the freedom of the individual to create him or herself, staring into the face of Nothing, the experience of absurdity, is one that is highly unsettling and even induces sickness-nausea—not the health that Nietzsche hopes for. Roquentin has been experiencing this Nausea throughout the novel as he has episodes of seeing into the heart of things; his experience of the absurdity of the chestnut tree root, of the barman’s purple suspenders at the “Railwayman’s Rendezvous,” these induce a feeling of illness. And it does not seem to be a passing illness that accompanies these episodes and then disappears as he comes to accept the problem of existence. Rather, it seems to become incorporated permanently into his being. At the end of one of his episodes, he states, “And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen.”12 Later that evening he writes, “I can’t say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me and I don’t believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.”13 It is as though his realizations have induced in him an illness that did not exist before, or at least, that he did not know existed, and that this sickness is now a part of his being. He must find a way to live with this nausea, to find meaning and purpose in spite of it. It almost seems as though it is an obstacle to be overcome rather than something out of which he will create. At the end of the novel, as he

listens to “Some of These Days” one last time before leaving for Paris (which he apparently doesn’t do), he says of the singer and of the songwriter, “Saved. Maybe they thought they were lost irrevocably, drowned in existence. Yet no one could think of me as I think of them, with such gentleness…They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course, but as much as any man can.”¹⁴ They have done so through the act of creation- it seems that this is the way in which man transcends meaningless existence, the “sin of existence.” For Nietzsche, it is exactly this idea of existence as a sin that he is trying to challenge, and again, his solution for overcoming involves an embracing, a loving of one’s existence as opposed to trying to push it away or achieve meaning in spite of it. In the last section of The Gay Science he states, …the spirits of my own book are attacking me, pull my ears, and call me back to order.

“We can no longer stand it,” they shout at me; “away, away with this raven-black music! Are we not surrounded by bright morning? And by soft green grass and grounds, the kingdom of the dance? Has there ever been a better hour for gaiety? Who will sing a song for us, a morning song, so sunny, so light, so fledged that it will not chase away the blues but invite them instead to join in the singing and dancing?”¹⁵

Even the terrible aspects, the most mundane, the most meaningless, along with the great, wonderful, uplifting and joyous; all of these are embraced, loved, and willed.

In recalling the terms Roquentin uses throughout the novel to describe his experiences of life and everyday objects during the Nausea, the reader sees a stark contrast-

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.”¹⁶

A “monstrous mass,” “disorder,” “frightful,” “obscene”; these are in direct contrast to “gaiety,” “dancing,” “sunny,” and “Yes-saying.” While these frightening terms in many ways are reminiscent of the Dionysian principle in Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, Sartre also gives an explicit rejection of Nietzsche in Nausea, and of those very Dionysian principles. Again, in the midst of one of his experiences of Nausea, Roquentin says,

Those trees, those great clumsy bodies…I began to laugh because I suddenly thought of the formidable springs described in books, full of crackings, burstings, gigantic explosions. There were those idiots who came to tell you about will-power and struggle for life. Hadn’t they ever seen a beast or a tree? This plane-tree with its scaling bark, this half-rotten oak, they wanted me to take them for rugged youthful endeavour surging towards the sky. And that root? I would have undoubtedly had to represent it as a voracious claw tearing at the earth, devouring its food? An element of death and decay seems to accompany Sartre’s characterizations of existence rather than life and a principle of growth and development—he continues on to speak of how these trees only seem to continue existing because they were “too tired” to no longer exist. Here he rejects amor fati. There is no sense of loving, accepting, and willing nature and all that is, only of trying to find meaning in spite of it. This is not to say that Sartre is not optimistic; he does tell us that we are free, but that freedom comes with the burden of responsibility. Perhaps they are essentially saying similar things when we get to the heart of the matter, but reading Nietzsche always gives me a very different sense than Sartre. They both offer infinite possibilities for existence as a result of the annihilation of meaning and foundation, but I always come away from Nietzsche feeling lighter. And perhaps Nietzsche has failed to address certain things that Sartre does, that those forty or so years between them, so full of chaos and anxiety as they were, had a profound influence on Sartre that Nietzsche never could have experienced, thus resulting in a heavier, more serious philosophy, although still one of freedom. Lastly, Sartre and Nietzsche wrote many more works than just those considered here, and both of them transformed their ideas over time; a full comparison would take much more time and space than I have here. However, a stark contrast is apparent between The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and Nausea, the reasons for which bear exploration.

\[17\] Sartre, Jean-Paul. Nausea. P. 133.