Few philosophers have thought highly of feeling wretched. A wise life has traditionally been associated with an attempt to reduce suffering: anxiety, despair, anger, self-contempt and heartache.

Then again, pointed out Friedrich Nietzsche, the majority of philosophers have always been ‘cabbage-heads’. ‘It is my fate to have to be the first decent human being,’ he recognized with a degree of embarrassment in the autumn of 1888. ‘I have a terrible fear that I shall one day be pronounced holy’; and he set the date somewhere around the dawn of the third millennium: ‘Let us assume that people will be allowed to read [my work] in about the year 2000.’ He was sure they would enjoy it when they did:

It seems to me that to take a book of mine into his hands is one of the rarest distinctions that anyone can confer upon himself. I even assume that he removes his shoes when he does so – not to speak of boots.

A distinction because, alone among the cabbage-heads, Nietzsche had realized that difficulties of every sort were to be welcomed by those seeking fulfilment:

You want if possible – and there is no madder ‘if possible’ – to abolish suffering; and we? – it really does seem that we would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been!

Though punctilious in sending his best wishes to friends, Nietzsche knew in his heart what they needed:
To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities — I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished. Which helped to explain why his work amounted to, even if he said so himself:

The greatest gift that [mankind] has ever been given.

3

We should not be frightened by appearances.

In the eyes of people who are seeing us for the first time . . . usually we are nothing more than a single individual trait which leaps to the eye and determines the whole impression we make. Thus the gentlest and most reasonable of men can, if he wears a large moustache . . . usually be seen as no more than the appurtenance of a large moustache, that is to say a military type, easily angered and occasionally violent — and as such he will be treated.
joy at the more enslaved we are by it, and so we [should] discard the goods of life and practise abstinence.

It sounded strange to his mother, who wrote back explaining that she didn’t like ‘that kind of display or that kind of opinion so much as a proper letter, full of news’, and advised her son to entrust his heart to God and to make sure he was eating properly.

But Schopenhauer’s influence did not subside. Nietzsche began to live cautiously. Sex figured prominently in a list he drew up under the heading ‘Delusions of the Individual’. During his military service in Naumburg, he positioned a photograph of Schopenhauer on his desk, and in difficult moments cried out, ‘Schopenhauer, help!’ At the age of twenty-four, on taking up the Chair of Classical Philology at Basle University, he was drawn into the intimate circle of Richard and Cosima Wagner through a common love of the pessimistic, prudent sage of Frankfurt.

Then, after more than a decade of attachment, in the autumn of 1876, Nietzsche travelled to Italy and underwent a radical change of mind. He had accepted an invitation from Malwida von Meysenbug, a wealthy middle-aged enthusiast of the arts, to spend a few months with her and a group of friends in a villa in Sorrento on the Bay of Naples.

'I never saw him so lively. He laughed aloud from sheer joy,' reported Malwida of Nietzsche’s first response to the Villa Rubinacci, which stood on a leafy avenue on the edge of Sorrento. From the living room there were views over the bay, the island of Ischia and Mount Vesuvius, and in front of the house, a small garden with fig and orange trees, cypresses and grape arbours led down to the sea.

The house guests went swimming, and visited Pompeii, Vesuvius, Capri and the Greek temples at Paestum. At mealtimes, they ate light dishes prepared with olive oil, and in the evenings, read together in the living room: Jacob Burckhardt’s lectures on Greek civilization, Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Vauvenargues, La Bruyère, Stendhal, Goethe’s ballad Die Braut von Korinth, and his play Die natürliche Tochter, Herodotus, Thucydidès, and Plato’s Laws (though, perhaps spurred on by Montaigne’s confessions of distaste, Nietzsche grew irritated with the latter: ‘The Platonic dialogue, that dreadfully self-satisfied and childish kind of dialectics, can only have a stimulating effect if one has never read any good Frenchmen . . . Plato is boring’).

And as he swam in the Mediterranean, ate food cooked in olive oil rather than butter, breathed warm air and read Montaigne and Stendhal (’These little things – nutriment, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness – are beyond all conception of greater importance than anything that has been considered of importance hitherto’), Nietzsche gradually changed his philosophy of pain and pleasure, and with it, his perspective on difficulty. Watching the sun set over the Bay of Naples at the end of October 1876, he was infused with a new, quite un-Schopenhauarian faith in existence. He felt that he had been old at the beginning of his life, and shed tears at the thought that he had been saved at the last moment.
He made a formal announcement of his conversion in a letter to Cosima Wagner at the end of 1876: 'Would you be amazed if I confess something that has gradually come about, but which has more or less suddenly entered my consciousness: a disagreement with Schopenhauer's teaching? On virtually all general propositions I am not on his side.'

One of these propositions being that, because fulfilment is an illusion, the wise must devote themselves to avoiding pain rather than seeking pleasure, living quietly, as Schopenhauer counselled, 'in a small fireproof room' — advice that now struck Nietzsche as both timid and untrue, a perverse attempt to dwell, as he was to put it pejoratively several years later, 'hidden in forests like shy deer'. Fulfilment was to be reached not by avoiding pain, but by recognizing its role as a natural, inevitable step on the way to reaching anything good.

What had, besides the food and the air, helped to change Nietzsche's outlook was his reflection on the few individuals throughout history who appeared genuinely to have known fulfilled lives; individuals who could fairly have been described — to use one of the most contested terms in the Nietzschean lexicon — as Übermenschen.

The notoriety and absurdity of the word owe less to Nietzsche's own philosophy than to his sister Elisabeth's subsequent enchantment with National Socialism ('that vengeful anti-Semitic goose', as Friedrick described her long before she shook the Führer's hand), and the unwitting decision by Nietzsche's earliest Anglo-Saxon translators to bequeath to the Übermensch the name of a legendary cartoon hero.

But Nietzsche's Übermenschen had little to do with either airborne aces or fascists. A better indication of their identity came in a passing remark in a letter to his mother and sister:

Really, there is nobody living about whom I care much. The people I like have been dead for a long, long time — for example, the Abbé Galiani, or Henri Beyle, or Montaigne.

He could have added another hero, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. These four men were perhaps the richest clues for what Nietzsche came in his maturity to understand by a fulfilled life.

They had much in common. They were curious, artistically gifted, and sexually vigorous. Despite their dark sides, they laughed, and many of them danced, too; they were drawn to 'gentle sunlight, bright and buoyant air, southerly vegetation, the breath of the sea [and] fleeting meals of flesh, fruit and eggs'. Several of them had a gallows humour close to Nietzsche's own — a joyful, wicked laughter arising from pessimistic hinterlands. They had explored their possibilities, they possessed what Nietzsche called 'life', which suggested courage, ambition, dignity, strength of character,
They had been involved in the world. Montaigne had been mayor of Bordeaux for two terms and journeyed across Europe on horseback. The Neapolitan Abbé Galiani had been Secretary to the Embassy in Paris and written works on money supply and grain distribution (which Voltaire praised for combining the wit of Molière and the intelligence of Plato). Goethe had worked for a decade as a civil servant in the Court in Weimar; he had proposed reforms in agriculture, industry and poor relief, undertaken diplomatic missions and twice had audiences with Napoleon.

On his visit to Italy in 1787, he had seen the Greek temples at Paestum and made three ascents of Mount Vesuvius, coming close enough to the crater to dodge eruptions of stone and ash.

Nietzsche called him 'magnificent', 'the last German I hold in reverence': 'He made use of . . . practical activity . . . he did not
divorce himself from life but immersed himself in it... [he] took as much as possible upon himself... What he wanted was totality; he fought against the disjunction of reason, sensuality, feeling, will.'

Stendhal had accompanied Napoleon's armies around Europe, he had visited the ruins of Pompeii seven times and admired the Pont du Gard by a full moon at five in the morning ('The Coliseum in Rome hardly plunged me into a reverie more profound...').

Nietzsche's heroes had also fallen in love repeatedly. "The whole movement of the world tends and leads towards copulation," Montaigne had known. At the age of seventy-four, on holiday in Marienbad, Goethe had become infatuated with Ulrike von Levetzow, a pretty nineteen-year-old, whom he had invited out for tea and on walks, before asking for (and being refused) her hand in marriage. Stendhal, who had known and loved Werther, had been as passionate as its author, his diaries detailing conquests across decades. At twenty-four, stationed with the Napoleonic armies in Germany, he had taken the innkeeper's daughter to bed and noted proudly in his diary that she was 'the first German woman I ever saw who was totally exhausted after an orgasm. I made her passionate with my caresses; she was very frightened.'

And finally, these men had all been artists ('Art is the great stimulant to life,' recognized Nietzsche), and must have felt extraordinary satisfaction upon completing the Essais, Il Socrate immaginario, Römische Elegien and De l'amour.

These were, Nietzsche implied, some of the elements that human beings naturally needed for a fulfilled life. He added an important detail; that it was impossible to attain them without feeling very miserable some of the time:

What if pleasure and displeasure were so tied together that whoever wanted to have as much as possible of one must also have as much as possible of the other... you have the choice: either as little dis-

pleasure as possible, painlessness in brief... or as much displeasure as possible as the price for the growth of an abundance of subtle pleasures and joys that have rarely been relished yet? If you decide for the former and desire to diminish and lower the level of human pain, you also have to diminish and lower the level of their capacity for joy.

The most fulfilling human projects appeared inseparable from a degree of torment, the sources of our greatest joys lying awkwardly close to those of our greatest pains:

Examine the lives of the best and most fruitful people and peoples and ask yourselves whether a tree that is supposed to grow to a proud height can dispense with bad weather and storms; whether misfortune and external resistance, some kinds of hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, mistrust, hardness, avarice, and violence do not belong among the favourable conditions without which any great growth even of virtue is scarcely possible.

Why? Because no one is able to produce a great work of art without experience, nor achieve a worldly position immediately, nor be a great lover at the first attempt; and in the interval between initial failure and subsequent success, in the gap between who we wish one day to be and who we are at present, must come pain, anxiety, envy and humiliation. We suffer because we cannot spontaneously master the ingredients of fulfilment.

Nietzsche was striving to correct the belief that fulfilment must come easily or not at all, a belief ruinous in its effects, for it leads us to withdraw prematurely from challenges that might have been overcome if only we had been prepared for the savagery legitimately demanded by almost everything valuable.

We might imagine that Montaigne's Essays had sprung fully formed from his mind and so could take the clumsiness of our own first attempts to write a philosophy of life as signs of a congenital
Le Rouge et le noir, *Vie de Henry Brulard* and *De l'amour* had been no easier to write. Stendhal had begun his artistic career by sketching out a number of poor plays. One had centred on the landing of an émigré army at Quiberon (the characters were to include William Pitt and Charles James Fox), another had charted Bonaparte’s rise to power and a third – tentatively titled *L'Homme qui craint d'être gouverné* – had depicted the slide of an old man into senility. Stendhal had spent weeks at the Bibliothèque Nationale, copying out dictionary definitions of words like ‘plaisanterie’, ‘ridicule’ and ‘comique’ – but it had not been enough to transform his leaden play-writing. It was many decades of toil before the masterpieces emerged.

If most works of literature are less fine than *Le Rouge et le noir*, it is – suggested Nietzsche – not because their authors lack genius, but because they have an incorrect idea of how much pain is required. This is how hard one should try to write a novel:

The recipe for becoming a good novelist . . . is easy to give, but to carry it out presupposes qualities one is accustomed to overlook when one says ‘I do not have enough talent.’ One has only to make a hundred or so sketches for novels, none longer than two pages but of such distinctness that every word in them is necessary; one should write down anecdotes every day until one has learnt how to give them the most pregnant and effective form; one should be tireless in collecting and describing human types and characters; one should above all relate things to others and listen to others relate, keeping one’s eyes and ears open for the effect produced on those present, one should travel like a landscape painter or costume designer . . . one should, finally, reflect on the motives of human actions, disdain no signpost for instruction about them and be a collector of these things by day and night. One should continue in this many-sided exercise for *some ten years*; what is then created in the workshop . . . will be fit to go out into the world.

The philosophy amounted to a curious mixture of extreme faith in human potential (fulfilment is open to us all, as is the writing of great novels) and extreme toughness (we may need to spend a miserable decade on the first book).

It was in order to accustom us to the legitimacy of pain that Nietzsche spent so much time talking about mountains.

It is hard to read more than a few pages without coming upon an alpine reference:

*Ecce Homo*: He who knows how to breathe the air of my writings knows that it is an air of heights, a *robust* air. One has to be made for it, otherwise there is no small danger one will catch cold. The ice is near, the solitude is terrible – but how peacefully all things lie in the light! how freely one breathes! how much one feels *beneath* one!
Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary living in ice and high mountains.

**On the Genealogy of Morals:** We would need another sort of spirit than those we are likely to encounter in this age [to understand my philosophy] . . . they would need to be acclimatized to thinner air higher up, to winter treks, ice and mountains in every sense.

**Human, All Too Human:** In the mountains of truth you will never climb in vain: either you will get up higher today or you will exercise your strength so as to be able to get up higher tomorrow.

**Untimely Meditations:** To climb as high into the pure icy Alpine air as a philosopher ever climbed, up to where all the mist and obscurity cease and where the fundamental constitution of things speaks in voice rough and rigid but ineluctably comprehensible! He was – in both a practical and spiritual sense – of the mountains. Having taken citizenship in April 1869, Nietzsche may be considered Switzerland’s most famous philosopher. Even so, he on occasion succumbed to a sentiment with which few Swiss are unacquainted. ‘I am distressed to be Swiss!’ he complained to his mother a year after taking up citizenship.

Upon resigning his post at Basle University at the age of thirty-five, he began spending winters by the Mediterranean, largely in Genoa and Nice, and summers in the Alps, in the small village of Sils-Maria, 1,800 metres above sea-level in the Engadine region of south-eastern Switzerland, a few kilometres from St Moritz, where the winds from Italy collide with cooler northern gusts and turn the sky an aquamarine blue.

Nietzsche visited the Engadine for the first time in June 1879 and at once fell in love with the climate and topography. ‘I now have Europe’s best and mightiest air to breathe,’ he told Paul Réé, ‘its nature is akin to my own.’ To Peter Gast, he wrote, ‘This is not Switzerland . . . but something quite different, at least much more southern – I would have to go to the high plateaux of Mexico overlooking the Pacific to find anything similar (for example, Oaxaca), and the vegetation there would of course be tropical. Well, I shall try to keep this Sils-Maria for myself.’ And to his old schoolfriend Carl von Gersdorff, he explained, ‘I feel that here and nowhere else is my real home and breeding ground.’

Nietzsche spent seven summers in Sils-Maria in a rented room in a chalet with views on to pine trees and mountains. There he wrote all or substantial portions of *The Gay Science, Thus Spake Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Twilight of the Idols*. He would rise at five in the morning and work until midday, then take walks up the huge peaks that locate the village, Piz Corvatsch, Piz Lagrev, Piz de la Margna, jagged and raw mountains that look as if they had only recently thrust through the earth’s crust under atrocious tectonic pressures. In the evening, alone in his room, he would eat a few slices of ham, an egg and a roll and go to bed early. (‘How can anyone become a thinker if he does not spend at least a third of the day without passions, people and books?’)

Today, inevitably, there is a museum in the village. For a few francs, one is invited to visit the philosopher’s bedroom, refurbished, the guidebook explains, ‘as it looked in Nietzsche’s time, in all its unpretentiousness’.

Yet to understand why Nietzsche felt there to be such an affinity between his philosophy and the mountains, it may be best to skirt the room and visit instead one of Sils-Maria’s many sports shops in order to acquire walking boots, a rucksack, a water-bottle, gloves, a compass and a pick.
A hike up Piz Corvatsch, a few kilometres from Nietzsche's house, will explain better than any museum the spirit of his philosophy, his defence of difficulty, and his reasons for turning away from Schopenhauerian deer-like shyness.

At the base of the mountain one finds a large car park, a row of recycling bins, a depot for rubbish trucks and a restaurant offering oleaginous sausages and rösti.

The summit is, by contrast, sublime. There are views across the entire Engadine: the turquoise lakes of Segl, Silvaplana and St Moritz, and to the south, near the border with Italy, the massive Sella and Roseg glaciers. There is an extraordinary stillness in the air, it seems one can touch the roof of the world. The height leaves one out of breath but curiously elated. It is hard not to start grinning, perhaps laughing, for no particular reason, an innocent laughter that comes from the core of one’s being and expresses a primal delight at being alive to see such beauty.

But, to come to the moral of Nietzsche’s mountain philosophy, it isn’t easy to climb 3,451 metres above sea-level. It requires five hours at least, one must cling to steep paths, negotiate a way around boulders and through thick pine-forests, grow breathless in the thin air, add layers of clothes to fight the wind and crunch through eternal snows.
Nietzsche offered another alpine metaphor. A few steps from his room in Sils-Maria a path leads to the Fex Valley, one of the most fertile of the Engadine. Its gentle slopes are extensively farmed. In summer, families of cows stand reflectively munching the almost luminously rich-green grass, their bells clanging as they move from one patch to another.

Streams trickle through the fields with the sound of sparkling water being poured into glasses. Beside many small, immaculate farms (each one flying the national and cantonal flags) stand carefully tended vegetable gardens from whose loamy soils sprout vigorous cauliflowers, beetroots, carrots and lettuces, which tempt one to kneel down and take rabbit-like bites out of them.

If there are such nice lettuces here, it is because the Fex Valley is glacial, with the characteristic mineral richness of soil once a glacial mantle has retreated. Much further along the valley, hours of strenuous walking from the tidy farms, one comes upon the glacier itself, massive and terrifying. It looks like a tablecloth waiting for a tug to straighten out its folds, but these folds are the size of houses and are made of razor-sharp ice, and occasionally release agonized bellows as they rearrange themselves in the summer sun.

It is hard to conceive, when standing at the edge of the cruel glacier, how this frozen bulk could have a role to play in the gestation of vegetables and lush grass only a few kilometres along the valley, to imagine that something as apparently antithetical to a green field as a glacier could be responsible for the field's fertility.

Nietzsche, who often walked in the Fex Valley carrying a pencil and leather-bound notebook ('Only thoughts which come from walking have any value'), drew an analogy with the dependence of positive elements in human life on negative ones, of fulfilment on difficulties:

When we behold those deeply-furrowed hollows in which glaciers have lain, we think it hardly possible that a time will come when a wooded, grassy valley, watered by streams, will spread itself out upon the same spot. So it is, too, in the history of mankind: the most savage forces beat a path, and are mainly destructive; but their work was none-the-less necessary, in order that later a gentler civilization might raise its house. The frightful energies—those which are called evil—are the cyclopean architects and road-makers of humanity.
But frightful difficulties are sadly, of course, not enough. All lives are difficult; what makes some of them fulfilled as well is the manner in which pains have been met. Every pain is an indistinct signal that something is wrong, which may engender either a good or bad result depending on the sagacity and strength of mind of the sufferer. Anxiety may precipitate panic, or an accurate analysis of what is amiss. A sense of injustice may lead to murder, or to a ground-breaking work of economic theory. Envy may lead to bitterness, or to a decision to compete with a rival and the production of a masterpiece.

As Nietzsche’s beloved Montaigne had explained in the final chapter of the Essays, the art of living lies in finding uses for our adversities:

We must learn to suffer whatever we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of discords as well as of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what could he sing? He has got to know how to use all of them and blend them together. So too must we with good and ill, which are of one substance with our life. And some 300 years later, Nietzsche returned to the thought:

If only we were fruitful fields, we would at bottom let nothing perish unused and see in every event, thing and man welcome manure.

How then to be fruitful?

Born in Urbino in 1483, Raphael from an early age displayed such an interest in drawing that his father took the boy to Perugia to work as an apprentice to the renowned Pietro Perugino. He was soon executing works of his own and by his late teens had painted several portraits of members of the court of Urbino, and altarpieces for churches in Città di Castello, a day’s ride from Urbino across the mountains on the road to Perugia.

But Raphael, one of Nietzsche’s favourite painters, knew he was not then a great artist, for he had seen the works of two men, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci. They had shown him that he was unable to paint figures in motion, and despite an aptitude for pictorial geometry, that he had no grasp of linear perspective. The envy could have grown monstrous. Raphael turned it into manure instead.

In 1504, at the age of twenty-one, he left Urbino for Florence in order to study the work of his two masters. He examined their cartoons in the Hall of the Great Council where Leonardo had worked on the Battle of Anghiari and Michelangelo on the Battle of Cascina. He imbibed the lessons of Leonardo and Michelangelo’s anatomical drawings and followed their example of dissecting and drawing corpses. He learned from Leonardo’s Adoration of the Magi and his cartoons of the Virgin and Child, and looked closely at an unusual portrait Leonardo had been asked to execute for a nobleman, Francesco del Giocondo, who had wanted a likeness of his wife, a young beauty with a somewhat enigmatic smile.

The results of Raphael’s exertions were soon apparent. We can compare Portrait of a Young Woman which Raphael had drawn before moving to Florence with Portrait of a Woman completed a few years after.
Mona had given Raphael the idea of a half-length seated pose in which the arms provided the base of a pyramidal composition. She had taught him how to use contrasting axes for the head, shoulder and hands in order to lend volume to a figure. Whereas the woman drawn in Urbino had looked awkwardly constricted in her clothes, her arms unnaturally cut off, the woman from Florence was mobile and at ease.

Raphael had not spontaneously come into possession of his talents; he had become great by responding intelligently to a sense of inferiority that would have led lesser men to despair. The career path offered a Nietzschean lesson in the benefits of wisely interpreted pain:

Don’t talk about giftedness, inborn talents! One can name all kinds of great men who were not very gifted. They acquired greatness, became ‘geniuses’ (as we put it) through qualities about whose lack no man aware of them likes to speak: all of them had that diligent seriousness of a craftsman, learning first to construct the parts properly before daring to make a great whole. They allowed themselves time for it, because they took more pleasure in making the little, secondary things well than in the effect of a dazzling whole.

Raphael had been able – to use Nietzsche’s terms – to sublimate (sublimieren), spiritualize (vergeistigen) and raise (aufheben) to fruitfulness the difficulties in his path.

The philosopher had a practical as well as a metaphorical interest in horticulture. On resigning from Basle University in 1879, Nietzsche had set his heart on becoming a professional gardener. ‘You know that my preference is for a simple, natural way of life,’ he informed his surprised mother, ‘and I am becoming increasingly eager for it. There is no other cure for my health. I need real work, which takes time and induces tiredness without mental strain.’ He remembered an old tower in Naumburg near his mother’s house, which he planned to rent while looking after the adjoining garden. The gardening life began with enthusiasm in September 1879 – but there were soon problems. Nietzsche’s poor eyesight prevented him from seeing what he was trimming, he had difficulty bending his back, there were too many leaves (it was autumn) and after three weeks, he felt he had no alternative but to give up.

Yet traces of his horticultural enthusiasm survived in his philosophy, for in certain passages, he proposed that we should look at our difficulties like gardeners. At their roots, plants can be odd and unpleasant, but a person with knowledge and faith in their potential will lead them to bear beautiful flowers and fruit – just as, in life, at root level, there may be difficult emotions and situations which can nevertheless result, through careful cultivation, in the greatest achievements and joys.

One can dispose of one’s drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis.
But most of us fail to recognize the debt we owe to these shoots of difficulty. We are liable to think that anxiety and envy have nothing legitimate to teach us and so remove them like emotional weeds. We believe, as Nietzsche put it, that 'the higher is not allowed to grow out of the lower, is not allowed to have grown at all ... everything first-rate must be causa sui [the cause of itself].'

Yet 'good and honoured things' were, Nietzsche stressed, 'artfully related, knotted and crocheted to ... wicked, apparently antithetical things'. 'Love and hate, gratitude and revenge, good nature and anger ... belong together,' which does not mean that they have to be expressed together, but that a positive may be the result of a negative successfully gardened. Therefore:

The emotions of hatred, envy, covetousness and lust for domination [are] life-conditioning emotions ... which must fundamentally and essentially be present in the total economy of life.

To cut out every negative root would simultaneously mean choking off positive elements that might arise from it further up the stem of the plant.

We should not feel embarrassed by our difficulties, only by our failure to grow anything beautiful from them.

It was for their apparent appreciation of the point that Nietzsche looked back in admiration to the ancient Greeks.

It is tempting when contemplating their serene temples at dusk, like those at Paestum, a few kilometres from Sorrento – which Nietzsche visited with Malwida von Meysenbug in early 1877 – to imagine that the Greeks were an unusually measured people whose temples were the outward manifestations of an order they felt within themselves and their society.

This had been the opinion of the great classicist Johann Winckelmann (1717–68) and had won over successive generations of German university professors. But Nietzsche proposed that far from arising out of serenity, classical Greek civilization had arisen from the sublimation of the most sinister forces:

The greater and more terrible the passions are that an age, a people, an individual can permit themselves, because they are capable of employing them as a means, the higher stands their culture.

The temples might have looked calm, but they were the flowers of well-gardened plants with dark roots. The Dionysiac festivals showed both the darkness and the attempt to control and cultivate it:

Nothing astonishes the observer of the Greek world more than when he discovers that from time to time the Greeks made as it were a festival of all their passions and evil natural inclinations and even
instituted a kind of official order of proceedings in the celebration of what was all-too-human in them... They took this all-too-human to be inescapable and, instead of reviling it, preferred to accord it a kind of right of the second rank through regulating it within the usages of society and religion: indeed, everything in man possessing power they called divine and inscribed it on the walls of their Heaven. They do not repudiate the natural drive that finds expression in the evil qualities but regulate it and, as soon as they have discovered sufficient prescriptive measures to provide these wild waters with the least harmful means of channeling and outflow, confine them to definite cults and days. This is the root of all the moral free-mindedness of antiquity. One granted to the evil and suspicious... a moderate discharge, and did not strive after their total annihilation.

The Greeks did not cut out their adversities; they cultivated them: All passions have a phase when they are merely disastrous, in which they draw their victims down by weight of stupidity—and a later, very much later one in which they marry the spirit, 'spiritualize' themselves. In former times, because of the stupidity of passion, people waged war on passion itself: they plotted to destroy it... Destroying the passions and desires merely in order to avoid their stupidity and the disagreeable consequences of their stupidity seems to us nowadays to be itself simply an acute form of stupidity. We no longer marvel at dentists who pull out teeth to stop them hurting.

Fulfilment is reached by responding wisely to difficulties that could tear one apart. Squeamish spirits may be tempted to pull the molar out at once or come off Piz Corvatsch on the lower slopes. Nietzsche urged us to endure.

And far from coincidentally, never to drink.

Dear Mother,
If I write to you today, it is about one of the most unpleasant and painful incidents I have ever been responsible for. In fact, I have misbehaved very badly, and I don't know whether you can or will forgive me. I pick up my pen most reluctantly and with a heavy heart, especially when I think back to our pleasant life together during the Easter holidays, which was never spoiled by any discord. Last Sunday, I got drunk, and I have no excuse, except that I did not know how much I could take, and I was rather excited in the afternoon.

So wrote eighteen-year-old Friedrich to his mother Franziska after four glasses of beer in the halls of Attenburg near his school in the spring of 1863. A few years later, at Bonn and Leipzig universities, he felt irritation with his fellow students for their love of alcohol: 'I often found the expressions of good fellowship in the clubhouse extremely distasteful... I could hardly bear certain individuals because of their beery materialism.'
The attitude remained constant throughout the philosopher's adult life:

Alcoholic drinks are no good for me; a glass of wine or beer a day is quite enough to make life for me a 'Vale of Tears' — Munich is where my antipodes live.

'How much beer there is in the German intelligence!' he complained. 'Perhaps the modern European discontent is due to the fact that our forefathers were given to drinking through the entire Middle Ages . . . The Middle Ages meant the alcohol poisoning of Europe.'

In the spring of 1871, Nietzsche went on holiday with his sister to the Hôtel du Parc in Lugano. The hotel bill for 2–9 March shows that he drank fourteen glasses of milk.

It was more than a personal taste. Anyone seeking to be happy was strongly advised never to drink anything alcoholic at all. Never:

I cannot advise all more spiritual natures too seriously to abstain from alcohol absolutely. Water suffices.

Why? Because Raphael had not drunk to escape his envy in Urbino in 1504, he had gone to Florence and learned how to be a great painter. Because Stendhal had not drunk in 1805 to escape his despair over L'Homme qui craint d'être gouverné, he had gardened the pain for seventeen years and published De l'amour in 1822:

If you refuse to let your own suffering lie upon you even for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible distress way ahead of time; if you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence, then it is clear that [you harbour in your heart] . . . the religion of comfortableness. How little you know of human happiness, you comfortable . . . people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, remain small together.

17

Nietzsche's antipathy to alcohol explains simultaneously his antipathy to what had been the dominant British school of moral philosophy: Utilitarianism, and its greatest proponent, John Stuart Mill. The Utilitarians had argued that in a world beset by moral ambiguities, the way to judge whether an action was right or wrong was to measure the amount of pleasure and pain it gave rise to. Mill proposed that:

[A]ctions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.

The thought of Utilitarianism, and even the nation from which it had sprung, enraged Nietzsche:

European vulgarity, the plebeianism of modern ideas [is the work and invention of] England.

Man does not strive for happiness; only the English do that.

He was, of course, also striving for happiness; he simply believed that it could not be attained as painlessly as the Utilitarians appeared to be suggesting:

All these modes of thought which assess the value of things according to pleasure and pain, that is to say according to attendant and secondary phenomena, are foreground modes of thought and naïveté which anyone conscious of creative powers and an artist's conscience will look down on with derision.

An artist's conscience because artistic creation offers a most explicit
example of an activity which may deliver immense fulfilment but always demands immense suffering. Had Stendhal assessed the value of his art according to the 'pleasure' and 'pain' it had at once brought him, there would have been no advance from L'Homme qui craint d'être gouverné to the summit of his powers.

And if one were still tempted to have a drink, but had no high opinion of Christianity, Nietzsche added a further argument to dissuade one from doing so. Anyone who liked drinking had, he argued, a fundamentally Christian outlook on life:

To believe that wine makes cheerful I would have to be a Christian, that is to say believe what is for me in particular an absurdity.

He had more experience of Christianity than of alcohol. He was born in the tiny village of Röcken near Leipzig in Saxony. His father, Carl Ludwig Nietzsche, was the parson, his deeply devout mother was herself the daughter of a parson, David Ernst Oehler, who took services in the village of Pobles an hour away. Their son was baptized before an assembly of the local clergy in Röcken church in October 1844.

Friedrich loved his father, who died when he was only four, and revered his memory throughout his life. On the one occasion when he had a little money, after winning a court case against a publisher in 1885, he ordered a large headstone for his father's grave on which he had carved a quotation from Corinthians (I Cor 13.8):

\[
\text{Die Liebe höret nimmer auf} \\
\text{Charity never faileth}
\]
'He was the perfect embodiment of a country pastor,' Nietzsche recalled of Carl Ludwig. 'A tall, delicate figure, a fine-featured face, amiable and beneficent. Everywhere welcomed and beloved as much for his witty conversation as for his warm sympathy, esteemed and loved by the farmers, extending blessings by word and deed in his capacity as a spiritual guide.'

Yet this filial love did not prevent Nietzsche from harbouring the deepest reservations about the consolation that his father, and Christianity in general, could offer those in pain:

I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. To me it is the extremest thinkable form of corruption . . . [it] has left nothing untouched by its depravity . . . I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity . . .

One does well to put gloves on when reading the New Testament. The proximity of so much uncleanness almost forces one to do so . . . Everything in it is cowardice, everything is self-deception and closing one's eyes to oneself . . . Do I still have to add that in the entire New Testament there is only one solitary figure one is obliged to respect? Pilate, the Roman governor.

Quite simply:

It is indecent to be a Christian today.

How does the New Testament console us for our difficulties? By suggesting that many of these are not difficulties at all but rather virtues:

If one is worried about timidity, the New Testament points out:
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5.5)

If one is worried about having no friends, the New Testament suggests:
Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil . . . your reward is great in heaven. (Luke 6.22–3)

If one is worried about an exploitative job, the New Testament advises:
Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh . . . Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. (Colossians 3.22–4)

If one is worried at having no money, the New Testament tells us:
It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (Mark 10.25)

There may be differences between such words and a drink but Nietzsche insisted on an essential equivalence. Both Christianity and alcohol have the power to convince us that what we previously thought deficient in ourselves and the world does not require attention; both weaken our resolve to garden our problems; both deny us the chance of fulfilment:

The two great European narcotics, alcohol and Christianity. Christianity had, in Nietzsche's account, emerged from the minds of timid slaves in the Roman Empire who had lacked the stomach to climb to the tops of mountains, and so had built themselves a philosophy claiming that their bases were delightful. Christians had wished to enjoy the real ingredients of fulfilment (a position in the world, sex, intellectual mastery, creativity) but did not have the courage to endure the difficulties these goods demanded. They had therefore fashioned a hypocritical creed denouncing what they
wanted but were too weak to fight for while praising what they did not want but happened to have. Powerlessness became ‘goodness’, baseness ‘humility’, submission to people one hated ‘obedience’ and, in Nietzsche’s phrase, ‘not-being-able-to-take-revenge’ turned into ‘forgiveness’. Every feeling of weakness was overlaid with a sanctifying name, and made to seem ‘a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen, a deed, an accomplishment’. Addicted to ‘the religion of comfortableness’, Christians, in their value system, had given precedence to what was easy, not what was desirable, and so had drained life of its potential.

Having a ‘Christian’ perspective on difficulty is not limited to members of the Christian church; it is for Nietzsche a permanent psychological possibility. We all become Christians when we profess indifference to what we secretly long for but do not have; when we blithely say that we do not need love or a position in the world, money or success, creativity or health – while the corners of our mouths twitch with bitterness; and we wage silent wars against what we have publicly renounced, firing shots over the parapet, sniping from the trees.

How would Nietzsche have preferred us to approach our setbacks? To continue to believe in what we wish for, even when we do not have it, and may never. Put another way, to resist the temptation to denigrate and declare evil certain goods because they have proved hard to secure – a pattern of behaviour of which Nietzsche’s own, infinitely tragic life offers us perhaps the best model.

Epicurus had from an early age been among his favourite ancient philosophers; he called him ‘the soul-soother of later antiquity’, ‘one of the greatest men, the inventor of an heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing’. What especially appealed to him was Epicurus’s idea that happiness involved a life among friends. But he was rarely to know the contentment of community: ‘It is our lot to be intellectual hermits and occasionally to have a conversation with someone like-minded.’ At thirty, he composed a hymn to loneliness, ‘Hymnus auf die Einsamkeit’, which he did not have the heart to finish.

The search for a wife was no less sorrowful, the problem partly caused by Nietzsche’s appearance – his extraordinarily large walrus moustache – and his shyness, which bred the gauche stiff manner of a retired colonel. In the spring of 1876, on a trip to Geneva, Nietzsche fell in love with a twenty-three-year-old, green-eyed blonde, Mathilde Trampedach. During a conversation on the poetry of Henry Longfellow, Nietzsche mentioned that he had never come across a German version of Longfellow’s ‘Excelsior’. Mathilde said she had one at home and offered to copy it out for him. Encouraged, Nietzsche invited her out for a walk. She brought her landlady as a chaperone. A few days later, he offered to play the piano for her, and the next she heard from the thirty-one-year-old Professor of Classical Philology at Basle University was a request for marriage. ‘Do you not think that together each of us will be better and more free than either of us could be alone – and so excelsior?’ asked the playful colonel. ‘Will you dare to come with me . . . on all the paths of living and thinking?’ Mathilde didn’t dare.

A succession of similar rejections took their toll. In the light of his depression and ill health, Richard Wagner decided that there were two possible remedies: ‘He must either marry or write an
But Nietzsche couldn’t write an opera, and apparently lacked the talent to produce even a decent tune. (In July 1872, he sent the conductor Hans von Bülow a piano duet he had written, asking for an honest appraisal. It was, replied von Bülow, ‘the most extreme fantastical extravagance, the most irritating and antimusical set of notes on manuscript paper I have seen for a long time’, and he wondered whether Nietzsche might have been pulling his leg. ‘You designated your music as “frightful” – it truly is.’)

Wagner grew more insistent. ‘For Heaven’s sake, marry a rich woman!’ he intoned, and entered into communication with Nietzsche’s doctor, Otto Eiser, with whom he speculated that the philosopher’s ill health was caused by excessive masturbation. It was an irony lost on Wagner that the one rich woman with whom Nietzsche was truly in love was Wagner’s own wife, Cosima. For years, he carefully disguised his feelings for her under the cloak of friendly solicitude. It was only once he had lost his reason that the reality emerged. ‘Ariadne, I love you,’ wrote Nietzsche, or, as he signed himself, Dionysus, in a postcard sent to Cosima from Turin at the beginning of January 1889.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche intermittently agreed with the Wagnerian thesis on the importance of marriage. In a letter to his married friend Franz Overbeck, he complained, ‘Thanks to your wife, things are a hundred times better for you than for me. You have a nest together. I have, at best, a cave... Occasional contact with people is like a holiday, a redemption from “me”.

In 1882, he hoped once more that he had found a suitable wife, Lou Andreas-Salomé, his greatest, most painful love. She was twenty-one, beautiful, clever, flirtatious and fascinated by his philosophy. Nietzsche was defenceless. ‘I want to be lonely no longer, but to learn again to be a human being. Ah, here I have practically everything to learn!’ he told her. They spent two weeks together in the Tautenburg forest and in Lucerne posed with their mutual friend Paul Rée for an unusual photograph.

But Lou was more interested in Nietzsche as a philosopher than as a husband. The rejection threw him into renewed prolonged, violent depression. ‘My lack of confidence is now immense,’ he told Overbeck, ‘everything I hear makes me think that people despise me.’ He felt particular bitterness towards his mother and sister, who had meddled in the relationship with Lou, and now broke off contact with them, deepening his isolation. (‘I do not like my mother, and it is painful for me to hear my sister’s voice. I always became ill when I was with them.’)

There were professional difficulties, too. None of his books sold more than 2,000 copies in his sane life-time; most sold a few hundred. With only a modest pension and some shares inherited from an aunt on which to survive, the author could rarely pay for new clothes, and ended up looking, in his words, ‘scraped like a mountain sheep’. In hotels, he stayed in the cheapest rooms, often fell into arrears with the rent and could afford neither heating nor the hams and sausages he loved.
health was as problematic. From his schooldays, he had suffered from a range of ailments: headaches, indigestion, vomiting, dizziness, near blindness and insomnia, many of these the symptoms of the syphilis he had almost certainly contracted in a Cologne brothel in February 1865 (though Nietzsche claimed he had come away without touching anything except a piano). In a letter to Malwida von Meysenbug written three years after his trip to Sorrento, he explained, 'As regards torment and self-denial, my life during these past years can match that of any ascetic of any time...'. And to his doctor he reported, 'Constant pain, a feeling of being half-paralysed, a condition closely related to seasickness, during which I find it difficult to speak - this feeling lasts several hours a day. For my diversion I have raging seizures (the most recent one forced me to vomit for three days and three nights; I thirsted after death). Can't read! Only seldom can I write! Can't deal with my fellows! Can't listen to music!'

Finally, at the beginning of January 1889, Nietzsche broke down in Turin's Piazza Carlo Alberto and embraced a horse, was carried back to his boarding-house, where he thought of shooting the Kaiser, planned a war against anti-Semites, and grew certain that he was - depending on the hour - Dionysus, Jesus, God, Napoleon, the King of Italy, Buddha, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Voltaire, Alexander Herzen and Richard Wagner; before he was bundled into a train and taken to an asylum in Germany to be looked after by his elderly mother and sister until his death eleven years later at the age of fifty-five.

And yet through appalling loneliness, obscurity, poverty and ill health, Nietzsche did not manifest the behaviour of which he had accused Christians; he did not take against friendship, he did not attack eminence, wealth, or well-being. The Abbé Galiani and Goethe remained heroes. Though Mathilde had wished for no more than a conversation about poetry, he continued to believe that 'for the male sickness of self-contempt the surest cure is to be loved by a clever woman.' Though sickly and lacking Montaigne or Stendhal's dexterity on a horse, he remained attached to the idea of an active life: 'Early in the morning, at break of day, in all the freshness and dawn of one's strength, to read a book - I call that vicious!'

He fought hard to be happy, but where he did not succeed he did not turn against what he had once aspired to. He remained committed to what was in his eyes the most important characteristic of a noble human being: to be someone who 'no longer denies'.

After seven hours of walking, much of it in the rain, it was in a state of extreme exhaustion that I reached the summit of Piz Corvatsch, high above the clouds that decked the Engadine valleys below. In my rucksack I carried a water-bottle, an Emmental sandwich and an envelope from the Hotel Edelweiss in Sils-Maria on which I had that morning written a quote from the mountain philosopher, with the intention of facing Italy and reading it to the wind and the rocks at 3,400 metres.

Like his pastor father, Nietzsche had been committed to the task of consolation. Like his father, he had wished to offer us paths to fulfilment. But unlike pastors, and dentists who pull out throbbing teeth and gardeners who destroy plants with ill-favoured roots, he had judged difficulties to be a critical prerequisite of fulfilment, and hence knew saccharine consolations to be ultimately more cruel than helpful:

The worst sickness of men has originated in the way they have combated their sicknesses. What seemed a cure has in the long run produced something worse than what it was supposed to overcome. The means which worked immediately, anaesthetizing and intoxicating, the so-called consolations, were ignorantly supposed to
be actual cures. The fact was not noticed ... that these instantaneous alleviations often had to be paid for with a general and profound worsening of the complaint.

Not everything which makes us feel better is good for us. Not everything which hurts may be bad.

To regard states of distress in general as an objection, as something that must be abolished, is the [supreme idiocy], in a general sense a real disaster in its consequences ... almost as stupid as the will to abolish bad weather.