

On Nietzsche's Maxim
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“That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger.” That's one maxim just about everybody knows and takes to heart. Or at least some version of it, the wording varies from speaker to speaker. Sometimes the reference is “us” rather than “me”: the 1982 version of the movie *Conan the Barbarian* opens with “That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger” and attributes it to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1840-1900). Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy back in the 1970s got a lot of attention using this “us” version. A recent Kelly Clarkson song makes it “you”: “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, stronger,” sings Kelly.

Nietzsche indeed is the one behind this dictum, another word for it. In an essay published in 1889, *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote: “Out of life's school of war: what does not kill me makes me stronger.” Here, Nietzsche likens life to being in a war, one that, if survived, has this strengthening outcome. I'm not sure if he was just talking about himself in this quote or setting out a fact of life that applies to everybody. Or just to some people: Nietzsche wrote a lot about a superior brand of human being, the *übermensch* in German, or, other terms for the concept, the overman or superman. So he may have been applying this axiom, yet another term for it, only to people of this higher sort and included himself, or a fictionalized version of himself (in real life Nietzsche wasn't exactly a dynamo), among their number. Although it has received little if any attention, Nietzsche had gotten at this basic notion in an earlier writing, albeit with a distinctly different twist, in a collection of thought fragments entitled *Maxims of a Hyperborean*: “What does not destroy us—we destroy and it makes us stronger.” Notice in this case we become stronger not by enduring adversity or attack but rather by destroying what would destroy us.

With reference to the maxim as it stands in our time, it seems to me that whether the referent is “me,” “us,” or “you” they all mean “a person”: that which doesn't kill a person makes him or her stronger. And it's clear that “kill” is not to be taken literally. “Kill” means “devastates,” “personally destroys,” “shatters,” “debilitates,”

“crushes”—in there somewhere: an instance in which someone might be really brought down, done in, in a major, lasting way.

Undoubtedly the popularity of this Nietzschean notion stems from the fact that despite its grim imagery (confronting something that could, figuratively anyway, kill you) it’s a positive, hopeful, feel-good idea. If things are going really rough, keep the faith, because going through this ordeal is going to beef you up. In fact, if you are seeking to get stronger—tougher, more resilient, less vulnerable, more battle ready, however you look at it—you might be advised to go looking for trouble, or at least not duck it, because it’ll accomplish that in the end if you tough it out.

But amid all this optimism we need to keep in mind that everything is what it is and isn’t everything else. In this case, a maxim is a maxim and real life is real life. Reality is far more complex and one-of-a-kind than any maxim can capture. My experience with real life, actual existence, my own and from observing the lives of other people both directly and indirectly through reading and such, leads me to conclude that what doesn’t kill us indeed does make us stronger . . . sometimes. And the sometimes it makes us stronger it does so in every imaginable way and to every imaginable extent. And in real life, sometimes what doesn’t kill us doesn’t strengthen us at all; rather, it diminishes us, hurts us, injures us severely, tellingly, and again, in different ways and degrees. And in real life, sometimes what doesn’t kill us weakens us in some ways and strengthens us in others, and again in every possible combination of those two phenomena, although I’ve noticed that usually the balance tips in favor of strength over weakness.

This last possibility—some combination of weakening and strengthening—seems to me the most likely outcome of major adversity. And that leads me to a modification of this most famous Nietzsche maxim (one that takes into account his early version of this basic idea):

That which doesn’t kill you will leave its scars, and you’ll be weaker as well as stronger as a result, but on balance you’ll be stronger—but then again, it might not happen that way in your case, so keep your eyes open and do whatever works for you, including destroying what would destroy you.

Thus it could be your best strategy when confronted with something that might kill you to fight like a wildcat and even (metaphorically, or, yes, literally) kill, or it might be to cut and run, or it might be to do something else, with no limit on what that something else might be.

And while you are doing whatever is best in the situation, maintain a healthy distrust of maxims, including the one I'm giving you here; instead, trust reality, and trust your wits.