

# THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SUFFERING IN NIETZSCHE\*

## La cuestión del sufrimiento humano en Nietzsche

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**ABSTRACT:** Suffering and how one relates to one's own and others' sufferings are important themes in Nietzsche's works from the first to the last, as I examined in my recent monograph, *Human Emotions in Nietzsche* (Basel: Schwabe, 2021). In this article, I will build on what I wrote on this subject in this book and elsewhere, as I examine five paradigms for dealing with suffering, which I name: aesthetic, critical/historic, emotional, power, and transfiguration. Although these paradigms and the ideas that support them are present in Nietzsche's works and many Nietzsche readers may be aware of them, their organization in this form has appeared to me during the pandemic. I do not claim that these paradigms form a complete picture, but I believe they are sufficient to give us a broad picture of Nietzsche's teachings on suffering.

*Keywords:* Suffering – pain – tragic suffering – pity – compassion – transfiguration

**RESUMEN:** El sufrimiento y cómo uno se relaciona con el sufrimiento propio y el de los demás son temas importantes en las obras de Nietzsche desde el primero hasta el último, como examiné en mi reciente monografía, *Las emociones humanas en Nietzsche* (Basilea: Schwabe, 2021). En este artículo, me basaré en lo que escribí sobre este tema en este libro y en otros lugares, mientras examino cinco paradigmas para lidiar con el sufrimiento, que llamo: estético, crítico/histórico, emocional, poder y transfiguración. Aunque estos paradigmas y las ideas que los sustentan están presentes en las obras de Nietzsche, y muchos lectores de Nietzsche pueden estar al tanto de ellos, durante la pandemia atise la exposición de este esquema. No pretendo

\* In my most recent monograph, *Nietzsche on Human Emotion* (Basel, Schwabe, 2021), I dealt with suffering and suffering related emotions such as pity and compassion in two chapters. In this essay, I would like to build on these chapters as I expand the five paradigms and focus on how one relates, or must relate, to suffering based on Nietzsche's works.

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que estos paradigmas formen un cuadro completo, pero creo que son suficientes para darnos un panorama amplio de las enseñanzas de Nietzsche sobre el sufrimiento.

*Palabras clave:* sufrimiento – dolor – sufrimiento trágico – pena – compasión – transfiguración

Thinking about illness!—To calm the imagination of the invalid, so that at least he should not, as hitherto, have to suffer *more* from thinking about his illness than from the illness itself—that, I think, would be something! It would be a great deal! Do you now understand our task?

Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Aphorism 54

The recent pandemic plunged the human species into a crisis. No event, however big, impacts the species in the same way, but the scope of this event has not excluded any part of our planet with the exception of a few parts. Every crisis creates stress and opens up deep wounds, but more importantly it brings out those latent forces that lie dormant in the corners of the human soul. These latent forces can span from love and hate, from benevolent and sacrificial acts to those of aggression and destruction, not to mention all the conspiracy speculations (not theories) they unleash. No doubt, one can write a long book on all of these forces; however, in this short reflection, I will share my thoughts on how Nietzsche responds to human suffering and what we can elicit from his thoughts. Ultimately, in and from whatever form or source suffering comes, how do and can, human beings address, individually and collectively, the real sufferings they experience in their lives? This is the question I will explore by way of Nietzsche's ideas, as I extract five paradigms from his writings: aesthetic/tragic, critical/historic, emotive, power and transfiguration.

### I. AESTHETIC-TRAGIC PARADIGM

*The Birth of Tragedy* offers not only a culturally relevant and necessary interpretation of Greek tragedy (or art in general) but also an insight into human suffering. Nietzsche presents it in an aesthetic context. If one can describe Nietzsche's idea of the tragic concisely, it would be this: to affirm all life forces, including destruction, death, and human suffering, create a public, grand artistic work, like theater and stage human suffering where spectators view the fall of their great heroes, sometimes even gods. The first attitude

is to accept human suffering fully, that is, one does not wish it away (unlike Epicureanism and Utilitarianism), one does not denigrate it (through abuse of suffering as in capitalism and different forms of Sadism), one does not hide it because of pride (perhaps modern egoism), one does not believe that suffering is the only thing there is and we must just withdraw into nothingness (pessimism as in Pascal and Schopenhauer), and, lastly, one does not turn it into a source for bitterness and hostility towards life (Nietzsche sees this in Christianity). The tragic experience of suffering is antithetical to these five attitudes. But what is the tragic affirmation of life? How is it a different experience of human suffering?

In order to understand how the tragic world-view offers a different approach to human suffering, we need to take a look at how Nietzsche introduces and uses the terms, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in this context. “We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* duality...”<sup>1</sup> These two impulses or tendencies, as Nietzsche calls them, the former that of dream and the latter that of intoxication, become two pillars of his cosmology in this period of his philosophy. All that comes into being disappears, all that is individuated loses its individuated state in accordance with the eternal laws of creation and destruction. These are the two cosmological cycles of existence that are bound with one another; they both entail joy and suffering in human existence—Nietzsche associates the Apollonian primarily with joy insofar as it pertains to pleasurable illusions and the Dionysian primarily with suffering insofar as it is ecstasy. On the one hand, in the coming-into-being there is rejoice in the individual since life is essentially joyful, but there is suffering on the part of nature for the loss of her child as the individuated, therefore separated, state. Moreover, the individual too suffers insofar as he is nature and carries the suffering of individuation within himself, which causes a yearning for a return to the undifferentiated state. On the other hand, in the disappearance of the individual there is suffering in the individual for this loss, but nature celebrates joyfully the return of the lost child and hence the reunion. Now when we enter into this highway of eternity, we are pulled by these two poles of joy of creation and suffering in destruction, the abundance of life and the call for reunion which, in the span of life itself, manifests itself as moments of ecstasy. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tries to show in what ways the tragic contemplation of existence, as

1 *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 1, p.33. For a broad understanding of these terms, refer to Sections 1-5.

made manifest in the works of tragic poets and thinkers, aims at an agonistic balance between joy and suffering.

There are, no doubt, many ways of dealing with suffering in human existence, and human-beings, in different epochs and civilizations, have created cultural formations, including cults and religions, by way of which they, individually or collectively, dealt with suffering. In the history of philosophy, on the other hand, there have been thinkers, most notably Pascal and Schopenhauer, who have given much thought and emphasis to this question and have introduced some other paradigms for suffering within the context of their philosophical systems. Some of these ways are at times in the foreground, at times in the background of Nietzsche's thought—there are at least four ways of dealing with suffering addressed by Nietzsche in his texts: wishing that suffering did not exist so as not to deal with it; accepting it and turning it into something monstrous and a source of hostility against life, accepting it and remaining in the attitude that says “there is nothing but suffering and wretchedness in this world” and finally accepting it and facing it with illusions in a cultural and artistic context. Here we are primarily addressing the last one, namely the question of suffering in the Homeric and the tragic age of the Greeks and Nietzsche's interpretation of it within the context of the problems of existence of his age. How then did the tragic man, in Nietzsche's account, deal with suffering and destruction?

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche interprets tragedy as affirmation of life in the face of suffering. How does the tragic man affirm life? What are the artistic forms which reflect certain aspects of the tragic *weltanschauung*? How is the tragic experience of the spectacle constituted? We will consider these questions from the standpoint of both poetry and theater as they are discussed in Nietzsche's early works where the themes of destruction and suffering take up a crucial place. To put it simply, the way tragic man deals with suffering is through illusions; this is not to say that only the tragic man deals with suffering through illusions, but, according to Nietzsche, the tragic experience of illusion is different than the experience of illusion in the previous mythic age, and we will touch upon this difference later. Let it suffice here to say that myths enter into a different constellation with other aspects of human existence in the tragic age, changing the character of the experience of illusion. What is at stake, then, is not strictly the content of illusions, but also the experience of illusion itself, that is, both what the illusions are and how one relates to them. Modern age is unconditionally antithetical to myth and mythical experience without making any distinctions between healthy myths and mythical experience, which, simultaneously, uplift a culture and help the individual, and decadent myths and mythical experience, which are destructive both for the culture, the individual and the human psyche. Myth and mythical experience must

be approached under the broader context of illusion and illusory experience; it can be said, at the outset, that myths are illusions and dreams which, via poetry, are elevated to collectivity, that is, originally individual illusions (of a poet) which, at some point, have value for the entire culture.

Now every human-being can create illusions from the flows of her dream and imagination in order to comfort her soul in loss and defeat, which help her face up to the difficulties of life and death. However, none of these individual illusions add up to form an arsenal of collective illusions from which all can draw when in need. In fact, in this century there has been so many gifted people with powerful imaginations and yet not a single new cosmology is born, which will fulfill the spiritual needs of our times. A cultural force is needed to create this arsenal and make it part of culture. One of the aspects of this force is poetry, insofar as poetry is the domain in which the production of illusion is given style—this is not the only aspect of poetry that is referred to in Nietzsche's early works, but mythopoesis, the myth-making power of poetry, stands out in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The need to be ecstatic and yet to be open to Apollonian illusions, visuals, dreams, images, etc. the powers of creation that are comforting. The Apollonian forces appear as sorceresses ready to heal (BT §7). In short, engagement in art, in the creative process in the face of suffering enables humans to confront suffering.

## II. CRITICAL/HISTORIC PARADIGM

In the second *Untimely Meditation*, in his reflections on the historical, Nietzsche adds a third form of history, namely critical history, to the other two forms, monumental and antiquarian, which he introduces to historiography. The antiquarian has to do with preservation of past works and the monumental with creation of great works based on great exemplary models. Now, why do we need the critical one? With critical history, we can destroy a part of ourselves, those toxic, repressive forces that the civilization, the civilizing process, has created for the sake of rule and order, that stand in the way of individuals' strife to create their own lives.

As Freud brings to light in his *Civilization and its Discontents*, some of the most questionable forms of suffering are those inflicted by human beings on others, as he lists three primary sources of suffering, from our body, from the external world and from our relations to other human beings. "The suffering which comes from the last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other" (1961: 26), simply because these kinds of human induced sufferings do not really have to happen; in other words, there is no metaphysical necessity for them to happen. Every form of bias, all forms of persecution of individuals, especially those who are marginal and different, every repressive measure and rule that is at odds with the authentic needs of human-beings create such

suffering and must be subjected to critical history. The conflict between the general, which the society represents, and the singular is an “eternal” conflict and produces its own forms of suffering. Arbitrary rules and laws that stand in the way of human needs (or the needs of a generation), control mechanisms and paternalistic structures that are repressive contribute to such sufferings. More often than not humans are lost in the maze of such conflicts and cannot make any sense of them.

Nietzsche explains how critical history must work, as it serves the authentic needs of a generation. He observes that from time to time one must possess and “...employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past.” (1983: 75) Every past is to be condemned, Nietzsche writes, and such condemnation entails violence. Let us consider how human history witnessed much violence and suffering during periods of cultural change as in revolutions, wars, and civil strife. Nietzsche also speaks of forgetfulness here: “It requires a great deal of strength to be able to live and to forget the extent to which to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing.” (1983: 76). One oscillates between forgetfulness and memory in such times. We need to remember that forgetfulness is part of the unhistorical, one of the three concepts Nietzsche introduces in the beginning of his essay along with the historical and the supra-historical. Therefore, critical history demands forgetfulness, “forgetting” a part of one’s past. Such forgetting may be a painful process, especially in those over-historic cultures.

Nietzsche also observes that much of our pain comes from our inheritance and removal of that part that goes against our authentic needs and true selves. Although we cannot remove ourselves from our past completely since “we are the outcome of earlier generations” (1983: 76), we can do so partially and incrementally. Nietzsche explains this process by way of an implantation of a second nature: “The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and inplant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away” (1983: 76). We cannot escape from our past entirely, we cannot pretend that it did not exist: “...it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain”; however, one can re-interpret one’s past in the presence of a second nature. Nietzsche understands that this is a dangerous process, because second natures are weaker than first natures. Our recent history is full of examples of such transformations and the dynamics and conflicts between first and second natures, both in the individual and collective arenas (for instance, conflicts between multi-culturalism and ethnocentricity, autocratic and democratic trends, tolerance for diverse life forms and conservatism). Although such transformations are painful—one

needs to be strong and face suffering to endure it—Nietzsche finds solace in the fact that first natures were also second natures once.

In addition, Nietzsche's concept of the unhistorical reveals the unconscious in history and how it can be incorporated into character and culture-making for which plastic powers are needed. While elucidating his aesthetics by way of Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* and emphasizing the Dionysian and the Dionysian arts like music, dance, and theater, in the second *Untimely Meditation* Nietzsche highlights the power of plastic arts, the power that all arts use. Plasticity enables us to mold ourselves into new shapes by dipping ourselves into the unconscious of history. In this creative process we are born anew but still remain connected to our past in some form.

### III. EMOTIVE PARADIGM

Many of Nietzsche's writings, published in his life time or posthumously published essays and notes, entail reflections on human emotions, especially in what Nietzsche calls his psychological observations starting in *Human, All Too Human*. First, Nietzsche covers a broad field in this territory by using several concepts such as feeling, sentiment, passion, sensation and affect; second, Nietzsche has insightful reflections on many different types of human emotions. While he is critical of lower emotions, that is, what he deems to be low, such as pity, guilt, revenge and *ressentiment*, he provokes the creative, psychologically observant reader to strive for higher emotions. Although the aforementioned emotions may stand out in his works, Nietzsche has expressed his thoughts on almost every primary human emotion, all of which need their own care and transformation. What is often misconstrued is Nietzsche's critical assessment of pity (translated from the German 'Mitleid' which literally means to suffer-with). Nietzsche's critique of pity does not exclude all forms of relating to others' sufferings, but rather exposes the double standards, self-appeasement, and the weakening elements in such forms. Otherwise, other ways of relating, which may be called 'compassion' or 'empathy', must be based on strength, must aim to make the person who feels the emotion and others stronger. Pity ultimately is a demeaning and a weakening emotion, as Nietzsche has demonstrated amply.

All disasters and catastrophes bring about much pain and suffering to those who are directly impacted by them and create anxiety in those who may be affected by them. The on-going pandemic has created such affects and unleashed a variety of weak and strong emotions. One reactive tendency is to seek blame and look for the guilty, which may be the driving force behind several conspiracy speculations. Guilt originates from a feeling of indebtedness, as *Schuld* indicates and as Nietzsche exposes it in the Second Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*; there Nietzsche traces the origin of guilt



to the creditor-debtor relationship in human evolution and society-making: "...the major moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debts]..." (1989: 62-63). Once an emotion that exists in concrete and material human relations becomes channeled unto spirits and gods, guilt becomes abstract and almost arbitrary, as arbitrary as K's guilt in Kafka's *Trial*. Now anyone can be found "guilty" under the existing rules, laws and ruling ideologies; and no one like K knows why one is guilty. Guilt becomes an accompanying feeling to existing power relations. Those who are found "guilty" will suffer the consequences of their alleged guilt. One can see how "arbitrary" this type of human induced suffering is the origin of which always remains murky.

Nietzsche, however, does not accept the burdening of the "innocence" of human existence with guilt and, therefore, projects onto a world where there is no guilt. We may be indebted to one another, but such indebtedness must be concrete, not in relation to higher beings that control and repress humanity but rather in relation to overhumanly goals and states. Nietzsche's attempt to remove guilt and all suffering associated with such guilt from existence, however, is not a call to end all human suffering (unlike the goal of transhumanists). Suffering is inevitable and intricately bound with joy, as Nietzsche had shown in *The Birth of Tragedy*. From the standpoint of the agonistic unity of human character, suffering and joy belong together. The question for Nietzsche is how one suffers without guilt, whether suffering is life-enhancing or life-denying, and whether suffering propels us towards our higher selves, that is, towards overhumanliness.

#### IV. POWER PARADIGM (AND THE REGIMES OF STRENGTH, STRIFE, AND ENHANCEMENT)

In different parts of his writings Nietzsche unravels the workings of power for which he coined two notions: the feeling of power and the will to power. For some reason, the first one is not often discussed because of Nietzsche's seeming emphasis on the latter. However, this is far from being true, especially when Nietzsche himself is not clear about the 'will' and, in some accounts, the will already includes feeling; the 'will' seems to be the coat hanger for Nietzsche where many concepts hang. Therefore, every form of the will to power is already a feeling of power. Instead of being carried away with these speculations, I will rather focus on some core teachings of Nietzsche's philosophy of power and show how his teachings on power present a model for suffering.

The first context in which the feeling of power appears is cruelty in *Daybreak* §18; here and elsewhere Nietzsche tries to understand power in terms of a set of feelings, especially those of joy and suffering, but also in



terms of pity. In what states of feelings and how does one relate to power? This seems to be the question that I infer from these writings. Of course, for Nietzsche, feelings are not just feelings, but there is a whole set of conditions, such as the psychic and the somatic conditions, which underlie those feelings. In addition, there are the linguistic representations of these feelings; Nietzsche claims that these two, though somehow related, have their own domains (D §34: "...To this extent the history of moral feelings is quite different from the history of moral concepts."). We can also add the rational justification of these feelings, yet as another related issue in the economy of human traits. In *Daybreak* §18, Nietzsche looks at suffering and cruelty as voluntary suffering and how such cruelty or ability to suffer empowered human existence: "to practice cruelty is to enjoy the highest gratification of the feeling of power." If we remove this quotation from the text or from Nietzsche's spirit, we are in troubled and shallow waters of interpretation. Firstly, the primary human experience is one's own experience, that is, the starting point is the individual self; therefore, he starts with voluntary suffering, self-chosen torture. Secondly, according to Nietzsche, we are all cruel beings with destructive potentialities. Thirdly, it is necessary that these destructive energies are posited somewhere and played out between *equals*, which would enhance a culture or humanity in general rather than destroy it utterly (this is one of the teachings of Nietzsche's notion of *agon*<sup>2</sup> which Hollingdale touches upon in his book *Nietzsche*).

Now Nietzsche sees that cruelty, infliction of suffering on oneself or on others insofar as we are sufferers ourselves (that is, wise and just), has played an important role not only in the archaic past of human existence, but throughout human history, and still does, but we moderns do not observe this. He goes further to consider those eras as "the actual and decisive eras of history which determined the character of mankind." Practicing cruelty is then a way of feeling powerful within oneself, partly because one comes out of self-infliction of suffering stronger or strongly, and partly because this inspires a degree of confidence. Or we can read the text in a different way and say cruelty plays an empowering role in human existence as a factor in the scheme of power. On the one hand, Nietzsche is showing the archaic layers of empowerment, that is, the process through which the spiritual leaders became, first, powerful over themselves through voluntary suffering, then powerful over their communities as their hard suffering gained confidence. On the other hand, he is pointing out that this archaic past is decisive in the formation of the human character and the logic of cruelty, suffering and empowerment is not only a thing of the past, contrary to what some may believe. He says, for

2 I have dealt extensively with this subject in my monograph, *Agon in Nietzsche*.

instance, that “change of any kind has needed its innumerable martyrs...” (*Daybreak* §18, 17).

Regarding this association between suffering and power, we can also study his views on punishment, that is, how punishment itself is an exercise of power. “By punishing himself he is exercising his power” (D §187). Although here the punishment in question is a self-punishment, it is nonetheless an exercise of power whether it is on oneself or on others. It is an exercise of power in the form of infliction of suffering. In *The Gay Science* §13, he expands on this point by saying that “benefit and hurting others are ways of exercising one’s power upon others,” and adds that “pain is a much more efficient means to that end than pleasure.” Why is this so? Why is pain more associated with power than pleasure? Do we not exercise power when we give pleasure to others or benefit them somehow? Nietzsche’s response is interesting: “pain always raises the question about its origin while pleasure is inclined to stop with itself without looking back.” In other words, because pleasure benefits us, we don’t question its origin; but that is not so with pain.

Since power simply is and we are all in some power configuration, Nietzsche finds ‘powerlessness’ problematic just as he would find lust for power problematic, that is, to be driven blindly by power or to desire to be powerful at all cost. To know oneself is also to know one’s power and to fit into one’s place in power relations both at the microlevel of our human existence and the macrolevel of our existence in this universe. What is important then is to find the gold-balance as he says in D §23, although there is a polarity between the two extremes as he highlights these polarities as power-hungriness and powerlessness in D §271 and there are degrees of power between these polar opposites. ‘Powerlessness’ could mean that we have and exercise tremendous power, but pose as though we are powerless (the case of the ascetic priest) or we have some power and play it out on others in a sly way again pretending to be powerless (the feelings of pity and altruism are related to this power scheme as in the case of the beggar who would do anything to get what he wants and the overbearing parent or friend who knows the best for the child or the friend). Nietzsche warns us against impotence (by way of the Greeks in this text, D §360) and, in D §23, gives a reason as to why and how the feeling of impotence is so common and is ingrained into our souls: the old fear of nature or things with the power to cause harm.

The lust for power is as problematic as the feeling of impotence. Since it is a matter of finding one’s own power in the scheme of things, the lust for power would take us to a place that is not our own. This lust for power is, at times, associated with the feeling of possession of the truth (or Truth). (D §204) Any ideology which is fueled and empowered with this possession (the recent acts of fundamentalists, ethnic cleansings, and the acts of nationalists

are recent examples). Nietzsche's examples are both from the middle ages and the modern age. What is at stake is the association between such problematic highest feeling of power and good conscience. For the medievals, the highest Truth was God, but now it is money and technology. He does emphasize that the nineteenth century Europe and America are power-hungry, but he also adds that they want to fall, for once, into powerlessness (D §271). Finally, those who want power resort to any means (D §348), this indicates the nihilistic tendency which underlies power hunger, or power at any price. Nietzsche warns against this type of nihilism.

Another important issue in Nietzsche's philosophy of power is power over oneself or self-mastery. Nietzsche suggests, in D §65, that those who can control themselves are also accustomed to a feeling of power. Now this self-control can be interpreted in different ways, but I read it as the Apollonian self-mastery, to know oneself, one's needs and to be able to set limits on oneself, which Nietzsche talks about often. The possession of oneself, one's power, is also related to this (D §437). This individual self-mastery may be the starting point to understand power and power relations in Nietzsche. Ultimately, we feel power within ourselves; how do we feel it, how do we empower the different forces that are within us. No doubt, we are thrown into an ethos of power; that is, a way of relating to power and power constellations, which have existed before us and which we have not created. This makes the power problem circular: is power individual or is it collective or is it both? Who creates the ethos of power? All of these questions point to value and value-creation among which we can count the ethos of power.

In conclusion to this part, Nietzsche exposes the unconscious workings of power in human existence and relations; we must own up to the strengths that we have, as we shed our weaknesses, and pursue active forms of power. While Nietzsche is critical of repressive power hierarchies, he was not naive about power relations that exist either horizontally or vertically. The primary question is what types of hierarchical power relations human-beings create and how we navigate our joys and sufferings in those relations.

#### V. TRANSFIGURATION PARADIGM

Transform and channel crude, cruel and destructive energies into creative and meaningful acts. All the out-of-context forms of destruction can be channeled into other arenas where one does not inflict suffering on one's fellow human-being.

Nietzsche brings to the foreground a cosmology that gives an account of destruction as well as creation, similar to the one espoused by such Presocratic philosophers as Heraclitus and Empedocles. For Heraclitus it is fire that consumes all things, and change is an inherent aspect of being, as

becoming and being are conjoined into one thought. For Empedocles, on the other hand, love and strife are the co-phenomenal principles of metaphysics; love brings all things together, whereas strife sets them apart. If we accept that destruction is the second half of the story of Being and we are part of the cycle of destruction like all other beings, it follows that this cycle goes through us in at least two ways: destruction happens to us (a form of aggression, if you will), while the ultimate destruction is our death, and we are destructive beings. The idea that we are destructive, and hence aggressive and cruel beings appears in different forms and places in Nietzsche's writings. What follows below I will explore some of them.

In many of his writings, Nietzsche calls for attention to the issue of cruelty as discussed above: "Let the most heroic souls question themselves on this point" (Nietzsche, 1982, 16). I would like to highlight some of the issues in the wisdom of cruelty: Desire to hurt, to inflict suffering, to be cruel to oneself or to others, which is a function of suffering and is a way of externalizing the destructive animal instincts, is a human trait. Cruelty, however, has a context; Nietzsche, while exposing human cruelty, is not advocating cruelty for the sake of cruelty or random cruelty or ideological cruelty which is rampant in our age as in ethnic cleansings and which has stamped itself in our institutions of discipline and punishment (see Foucault's critique in this regard in his *Discipline & Punish*). The context of cruelty is, as in the culture of agon (or competition), determined as openness, *equality* of opponents, reciprocity within a broader context of justice which the culture of participants uphold. Insofar as we can create such collective contexts to vent cruelty, we will be able to overcome problematic expressions of cruelty—the reason why institutions, states can be cruel, in the negative sense, is because such cruelty has acceptance in the collective psyche.

There are two important observations to make on cruelty, both of which are based on Nietzsche's texts, which cannot be emphasized enough: 1) Cruelty is deeply rooted in the human psyche and the body, and 2) it is necessary to acknowledge this condition and to "refine cruelty." In the aphorism quoted above from *Daybreak*, Nietzsche speculates on the origin of the joy of cruelty within the context of voluntary suffering. Here cruelty is presented as "one of the oldest festive joys of mankind" (Nietzsche, 1982, 17-18); before the spectacles of cruelty gods are refreshed and rejoiced, because they smile upon mortals when they suffer. They do not feel pity, because pity is contemptible and goes against gods' powerfulness, and enjoy watching acts of powerfulness, which are also acts of cruelty: "...to practice cruelty is to enjoy the highest gratification of the feeling of power" (Ibid.) According to Nietzsche, the voluntary suffering originates here. Finally, the sacrifice on the altar, another act of cruelty, though this time against animals (that have

symbolically replaced humans), is an act of appeasement of the evil gods with good odor and an act of reconciliation. All of these elements can be directly applied to a cruel game of contest, let's say, at Olympia:<sup>3</sup> Zeus feels rejoiced as he watches a cruel game of pankration at the games and is appeased with the odor of blood and burned flesh of the one hundred oxen sacrificed on his altar. His evilness may stem from the fact that he demands suffering and cruelty from mortals. According to Nietzsche, these archaic layers of the human psyche and body still persist in human character; they may have been sublimated or channeled onto other areas. Yet we must learn better to observe ourselves.

The second important teaching of cruelty is that it must be refined: *Verfeinerte Grausamkeit*, refined cruelty. I borrow this phrase from *Daybreak*, Aphorism 30, but its content, though related to contest, will not be of any use for this teaching. The central idea is that a culture recognizes the need for expressions of cruelty and creates its forums where such expressions can be possible under the agreed upon customs and rules. "...the Greek genius tolerated the terrible presence of this urge [to urge to struggle and fight for victory] and considered it *justified*...Struggle and the joy of victory were recognized..." (Nietzsche, 1982, 32). Both struggle and victory involve cruelty: "...the cruelty of victory is the pinnacle of life's jubilation" (Nietzsche, 1954, 34). It was the genius of ancient Greece that saw the necessity to create assemblies so as to allow expressions of cruelty. Many of the creative forces of the agonal age, from poets to athletes, were channeled into the making of these assemblies; agon was their poesy, their work of culture.

Cruelty usually invokes, especially in our age, some form of injustice, and no one says, especially in public, that one is cruel in general or cruel to someone. But so much cruelty still happens in the world. Now what Nietzsche says about cruelty, which was discussed widely before, is that human-beings have cruel tendencies (an insight which can be tied with the Dionysian, the cycle of destruction, death and death instinct). Therefore, it is important for the health of the soul to externalize these tendencies in some way since their internalization as revenge and *ressentiment* create "the bad conscience." Nietzsche revisits ancient Greek culture to remind the reader of the danger of the bad conscience and how it dealt with it:

That the conception of gods *in itself* need not lead to the degradation of the imagination that we had to consider briefly, that there are *nobler* uses for the

3 The cruel trait of the agonistic Greeks and their tiger-like lust to annihilate are acknowledged by Nietzsche in the opening passages of his "Homer's Contest." (1954, 32). It must be noted here that not every discussion of cruelty by Nietzsche is presented in an agonistic context. For instance, in *The Birth of Tragedy* most of the appearances of 'cruelty' are in a Dionysian context.

invention of gods than for the self-crucifixion and self-violation of man in which Europe over the past millennia achieved its distinctive mastery—that is fortunately revealed by a mere glance at the *Greek gods*, those reflections of noble and autocratic men, in whom *the animal* in man felt deified and did *not* lacerate itself, did *not* rage against itself! For the longest time these Greeks used their gods precisely so as to ward off the “bad conscience,” so as to be able to rejoice in their freedom of soul—the very opposite of the use to which Christianity put its God (1967, 93-94).

The *agonal* soul rejoices in the animal-like cruelty and the animal-like freedom. The need to externalize the animal instincts and to deify this, or to make highest values out of it, is made clear by Nietzsche in the passage above. But in what way or how to externalize? In what degrees? Where? Individually or collectively? Nietzsche does not answer these questions since there in no one best way for externalizing the animal instincts. But he does think this question within the context of justice is evident not only from the association of externalization with gods, the highest values, as said above, but also from the fact that the question of justice comes up in the Second Essay of *The Genealogy*.

Finally, the theme of suffering provoked Nietzsche’s thought in every phase of his development. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is through the wisdom of Dionysian suffering that one could *know* the destructibility of all existence and achieve the ecstatic oneness of all being, but yet this knowledge produces nausea and calls for the veils of illusion. Great human beings are sufferers for Nietzsche, and “...without agonies one cannot become a leader and educator of mankind...” (1986, 61). The capacity to deal with suffering is then embedded in the notion of transfiguration, which, on the one hand, accepts suffering as an existential condition, and which, on the other hand, projects onto formations in thought and in action that allow for its externalization and sublimation.<sup>4</sup>

The following is a summary of some of the essential points of Nietzsche’s teachings on the subject:

First, the Dionysian, which Nietzsche presents in his early works, already contains ideas of aggression and cruelty. The Dionysian acts are often violent, as they go against the main trends of society. Ecstatic rites, maenads’ dances and satyrs’ rituals do not follow ordinary acts. On the other hand, the Dionysian stands for the destructibility of all beings, that is, our mortality.

Second, in the culture of agonism, one finds aggressive trends, as contestants compete against one another; again, here the influence of ancient

4 I dealt with this subject extensively in my *Agon in Nietzsche*.



Greece on Nietzsche is obvious. Some forms of contests are more aggressive than others.

Third, cruelty is an archaic layer in the human soul (as discussed above by way of *Daybreak*), as one detects it in gods, festivals, etc. The amount of cruelty has to do with the level of suffering that people can tolerate. According to Nietzsche, we moderns have become soft and cannot tolerate as much pain as ancients could, meaning that for us cruelty is more repressed and comes out in different forms.

Fourth, the idea that aggression can be repressed and its externalization misguided in different forms in different parts of the human civilization; this is tied to logocentricity, the repression of the body, etc. It also comes out as guilt, sin, and punishment, as Nietzsche presents in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

Fifth, aggression must be externalized, and its externalization can be “sacred” as in Greek polytheism (as Nietzsche shows in the Second Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*). The animal human has to be embraced and externalized again. Enframed externalizations will help diminish undue aggressions that are out of context.

#### EPILOGUE

There is a tendency in human existence to blame others when problems appear, even if the blamer is clearly implicated in the problem, or there is no one to blame as it happens with the recent pandemic. One sees this type of blaming in families and among friends but also in society at large. There could be a multitude of reasons, a combination thereof, as to why this happens: a) the blamers may not see a short-coming or weakness in their being or culture (due to either individual or collective narcissism, endemic to modernity’s subjectivity); b) the problems that exist cannot be solved and one deflects them onto others rather than fall into despair (an easy escape from a deeper, personal crisis); c) blaming may be a way of grieving (happens with parents who lose their children); d) an existing ideology comes handy to blame a group or an ethnicity; e) blaming can be used as a political tool; and lastly f) many people follow the existing conventions. However, such guilt-seeking and blaming does not resolve the deep roots of our suffering. In order to address the truth of human suffering, one must counter suffering tragically with joy, excise a part of one’s self critically, embrace one’s emotive self holistically, exercise ‘active’ forms of power, and transfigure and sublimate one’s destructive instincts and cruel tendencies towards higher goals so as to ennoble suffering. These are some of the core teachings of Nietzsche on this all too human subject.



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