

# Pain, suffering, and the death of god



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In order to understand Nietzsche, one must actually feel, physically and emotionally, the pain which was the catalyst that inspired him. The phenomenon of pain affects humans differently than animals, as humans are both emotionally and physically aware of the pain. Human beings know what it is to tell the great lie of our culture. This lie is the denial of suffering in everyday life. The human capability to shape the pain into something distant, a layer inside our consciousness wrapped around our pain, suffocating the pain.

This process lessens the intensity, helping to feel less of its nature. This manipulates the pain into something that fits into the way humans look at life. Nietzsche's understanding of pain shows it to be not necessarily the same as displeasure, and certainly not the same as pleasure, but believing the idea that "pain is pleasure." When emotional or physical pain strikes too hard, one is neither prepared or programmed for such an impact. The transfiguration that follows is the explanation of how we learn from life.

It may be senseless to go into that process now, as it is of a highly specific nature; each process is differently structured for each individual. This is much like the internal crystal of a snowflake. As each individual has a special and unique way of interpreting the pain that they feel. This process is what brought forth Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the man who metaphorically came climbing out of the caves, expressing Nietzsche's belief that life is pain. Zarathustra is a way of dealing with pain out of sheer necessity.

Zarathustra's internal fibers were so fine that the pain struck to rip through much of him.

He reached an uncommonly deep thread that was so finely tuned that when struck, brought forth the most penetratingly beautiful music. Nietzsche believes that human wisdom is elevated in direct proportion to the depths of human suffering, as well as the overcoming of suffering. Direct experience of the harsh and impersonal nature of the universe leads to a unique understanding of reality. This sets a person above and beyond the comparatively shallow belief systems and illusionary hopes of the mass of humanity of “ the herd.

For the herd, suffering is an affliction upon humanity, either shaped as judgment by higher forces or as part of our “ pitiful lot in life. ” For Nietzsche, however, suffering is an opportunity. It challenges us as individuals to discover previously unfathomed strength within ourselves. It is the well-spring of greater human existence. Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that, The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—know ye not that it is only this discipline that has produced all the elevations of humanity hitherto?

The tension of soul in misfortune which communicates to it its energy, is shuddering in view of rack and ruin, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, and exploiting misfortune, and whatever depth, mystery, disguise, spirit, artifice, or greatness has been bestowed upon the soul—has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? The act of taking on profound human suffering as a means of personal empowerment makes an individual greater than other human beings.

It allows individuals to cast aside old values and beliefs and forge their own intimate meaning in life. In doing so, they emerge free of the herd. They can rightfully look down upon those still squandering their lives, avoiding suffering as much as possible. Individuals can react in fear when suffering comes forth, relying on ridiculous belief systems and avoidance mechanisms to fight suffering. Far better to face it courageously with unflinching hardness of spirit, learning what it can teach and experiencing the entire endeavor as a transformation, rather than as an affliction.

This is the “ discipline,” to which Nietzsche refers, and it should justifiably be a source of pride in the individual. Again from *Beyond Good and Evil: The intellectual haughtiness and loathing of every man who has suffered deeply—* it almost determines the order of rank how deeply man can suffer—the chilling certainty, with which he is thoroughly imbued and colored, that by virtue of his suffering he knows more than the shrewdest and wisest can ever know, that he had been familiar with, and “ at home” in, many distant, dreadful worlds of which “ you know nothing”! this silent intellectual haughtiness of the sufferer, this pride of the elect of knowledge, of the “ initiated,” of the almost sacrificed, finds all forms of disguise necessary to protect itself from contact with officious and sympathizing hands, and in general from all that is not is equal in suffering. Profound suffering makes noble: it separates. It is this transformation that sets individuals above the herd, beyond the last man, and paves the way for the Overman. From a broader perspective, there is a universal benefit to suffering within society as a whole. Suffering is an indicator of creative forces at work in humanity.

Society cannot advance as a civilization without experiencing a corresponding degree of disruption in its cultural fabric. The suffering of society in times of change and development is a natural consequence of the dynamics of change. Suffering actually has a strangely liberating quality, as Nietzsche implies in his writings. For Nietzsche, suffering makes one “hard.” If it is true that which does not kill us makes us stronger, then it is equally true that by overcoming suffering, by facing it squarely and by not turning toward such overworn tools as “faith” and “hope”, we become something greater than what we were without suffering.

Nietzsche poses the provocative statement, “people would rather will nothingness than not will anything at all.” The statement breaks down into two categories of people: the weak, or the herd, and the strong, the Overman. Nietzsche associates the weak with Christians and the English Democrats and Psychologists as derivations of the Christian movement. Christians would rather will nothingness and Nietzsche would rather not will anything at all. Christians believe in autonomy and cling to this freedom of the will as an endowment from the Creator unto all, whose image all people bear. Nietzsche equates God with the nothingness for which humans truly long. While God was the ultimate expression of worldly values and the instincts that gave birth to those values, belief in that God nevertheless did give life meaning for a time. The death of God means that the idea of God can no longer provide values. To avoid nihilism, the belief in nothingness or nonexistence, Nietzsche presents the Overman as the creator of new values. In this way, it appears as a solution to the problem of the death of God.

Because the Overman acts to create new values within the moral emptiness of nihilism, there is nothing that this creative act would not justify. The self, the idea of a unified being which is the source of consciousness, is necessary for the herd so that they might automatically will with their freedom into God who frees them from the burdens of life into Nihilism. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believes that the negation of the self is necessary to be freed from the burdens of life because it is only when someone rejects God, which a person no longer feels the burden of moral demand.

According to Nietzsche, it is important to reiterate that the self begets God. The self emerged when people entered the original polis. Humans no longer needed aggression, and that same aggression, with no direction, took an “inward turn.” Thus, the self originates in self-mutilation, self-inflicted suffering, and thus the conscience. To justify this suffering, man interprets such as “I’m doing this for the sake of the community.” As the polis progressed through war and prosperity, the community venerated the ancestors as gods.

History then continues and this same society transformed the ancestor-gods into a singularly supreme being, the God of the Old Testament. The community justified suffering in spite of the self; then ancestors justified suffering, next gods, and finally God himself. Then society deemed this God as supreme and infallible. One unconsciously chooses God who, according to Nietzsche, is nothing but a generational lie. Man does not achieve nihilism by self-willing but rather by self-negating. Man negates himself by directing will away from himself and annihilating consciousness.

No consciousness is the nihilism that Nietzsche thinks man really desires. The herd refuses to turn away from God, the self, and autonomy. People would rather will nothingness than not will anything at all. Therefore, Nietzsche concludes that the Christian exerts his “will to power” over and against himself and, thus, will deny his natural inhibitions — his very existence — to achieve, says Nietzsche, the true God, true nothingness, true Nihilism. Nietzsche, by this statement, concludes that the Christian falsely believes in God, and opposes man’s true animalistic instincts.

Aggression, or the “will to power,” must turn outward to erase consciousness and develop a truer sense of man’s primal nature. Throughout Nietzsche’s work, we hear a lot about the idea that God is dead. For some people the fact that God is dead can be a pessimistic and painful view of our world. Many people base their whole lives around that fact that they think there is a God looking over everyone and making certain things happen for people, due to their religious worship of him. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*: God is dead. God remains dead.

And we have killed him. How shall we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled under our knife,— who will wipe the blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves? What lustrums, what sacred games shall we have to devise? Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? “God is dead” does not mean that Nietzsche believed in an actual God, who first existed and then died in a literal sense.

It may be more appropriate to consider the statement as Nietzsche's way of saying that the conventional Christian God is no longer a viable source of any absolute moral principles. Nietzsche recognizes the crisis which the death of God represents for existing moral considerations, because "When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident. By breaking one main concept out of Christianity, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands." This is why in "The Madman," a passage which primarily addresses nontheists, people who reject any belief in a personal god or gods, states that the problem is to retain any system of values in the absence of a divine order. The death of God will lead, Nietzsche says, not only to the rejection of a belief of cosmic or physical order but also to a rejection of absolute values themselves, and to the rejection of belief in an objective and universal moral law, binding upon all individuals.

In this manner, the loss of an absolute basis for morality leads to nihilism, the viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless. This nihilism is that for which Nietzsche worked to find a solution by reevaluating the foundations of human values. This meant, to Nietzsche, looking for foundations that went deeper than Christian values. He would find a basis in the "will to power" that he described as "the essence of reality." Nietzsche believed that the majority of people did not recognize the death of God out of the unconditional fear.

Therefore, when the death became widely acknowledged, people would despair, and nihilism would become rampant. This is partly why Nietzsche saw Christianity as nihilistic. He may have seen himself as a historical figure



like Zarathustra, Socrates, or Jesus, giving a new philosophical orientation to future generations to overcome the impending nihilism. Nietzsche believed there could be positive possibilities for humans without God. Relinquishing the belief in God opens the way for human creative abilities to fully develop.

The Christian God would no longer stand in the way, so human beings might stop turning their eyes toward a supernatural realm, and begin to acknowledge the value of this world. Nietzsche uses the metaphor of an open sea, which can be both exhilarating and terrifying. The people who eventually learn to create their lives anew will represent a new stage in human existence. Nietzsche puts the statement “ God is Dead” into the mouth of a “ madman” in *The Gay Science*.

In the madman’s passage, the man is described as running through a marketplace shouting, “ I seek God! I seek God! ” He arouses some amusement; no one takes him seriously. “ Maybe he took an ocean voyage? Lost his way like a little child? Maybe he’s afraid of us non-believers and is hiding? ” Then there was much laughter. Frustrated, the madman smashes his lantern on the ground, crying out that “ God is dead, and we have killed him, you and I! ” “ But I have come too early,” he immediately realizes, as his detractors of a minute before stare in astonishment: people cannot yet see that they have killed God.

He goes on to say: This prodigious event is still on its way, and is travelling,- it has not yet reached man’s ears. Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars need time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest

star,-and yet they have done it. Earlier in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche wrote “ God is Dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. And we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. The protagonist in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, speaks to himself after visiting a hermit who, every day, sings songs and lives to glorify his god: ‘ And what does the saint do in the forest? ’ asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: ‘ I make hymns and sing them; and in making hymns I laugh and weep and mumble: then do I praise God. ‘ With singing, weeping, laughing, and mumbling do I praise the God who is my God. But what do you bring us as a gift? ’ When Zarathustra had heard these words, he bowed to the saint and said ‘ What should I have to give you! Let me rather hurry hence for fear that I take nothing away from you! – And then they parted from one another, the old man and Zarathustra, laughing like school boys.

When Zarathustra was alone, however, he said to his heart: ‘ Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest has not yet heard of it, that God is dead! ’ In conclusion, according to Nietzsche, our attitude toward pain and suffering should be one in which we embrace our suffering and attempt to take on as much difficult responsibility as possible. The value of suffering, , is only extrinsic: suffering, “ great” suffering, is a prerequisite of any great human achievement.

As Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science*: It is the great pain only which is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit... It is great pain only, the long slow pain which takes time, by which we are burned as it were with green wood, that

compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths, and divest ourselves of all trust, all good nature, veiling, gentleness, and averageness, wherein we have perhaps formerly installed our humanity. I doubt whether such pain ‘ improves’ us; but I know that it deepens us.