
Language and Nietzsche's Critique of Suffering

In his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche explores the relationship between suffering and guilt. Nietzsche argues that humans react to suffering by thinking that "someone or other must be guilty" (Nietzsche 94) for their suffering. Nietzsche critiques this phenomenon -- that a sufferer feels a need to blame someone for their suffering -- through an analysis of why sufferers feel the need to assign guilt, how this need can turn inward, and why this need is self-destructive. In his critique, Nietzsche employs a deconstructive and figurative approach to language. He explores word origins, analyzes the implications of grammar, and utilizes multiple metaphors. Nietzsche's unique approach is critical in the construction of his critique.

One important part of Nietzsche's critique is his explanation of why sufferers feel the need to assign guilt. He begins his explanation by exploring the reactive tendencies of powerless beings through a metaphor: a powerless lamb constantly preyed upon by a powerful bird of prey. The lamb, powerless to stop the bird, concludes that the bird of prey is evil because it preys upon the lamb and that the lamb is good because it is nothing like the bird. In this reaction, the lamb compensates for its *ressentiment*, or anger and resentment at its powerlessness, by becoming the stronger moral being despite the fact that it is physically weaker. This reaction is the lamb's will to power. The will to power is every individual's drive "for an optimum of favorable conditions in which to fully release [its] power" (76). The reactive will to power of the lamb is similar to the sufferer's reactive need to assign guilt. As a reaction to suffering, sufferers look for a guilty party -- their own bird of prey -- because they want a "living being upon whom [they] can release emotions... because the release of emotions is the greatest attempt at relief" (93). In finding a guilty party, sufferers find a site of revenge to displace their hurt. This site of revenge produces an affect -- like the righteousness of the lamb against the bird of prey -- that overwhelms the suffering.

Although Nietzsche accepts the conclusions of the sheep and the sufferer as understandable based on their powerlessness, he rejects that these conclusions can be used to blame the bird of prey for its actions or label it as evil. Just as it would be absurd to ask the sheep to overcome its powerlessness and kill the bird of prey, it is equally absurd to ask the bird of prey not to kill the sheep. The bird of prey kills; it does not choose whether or not to do this. Nietzsche argues that the misconception that the bird of prey is culpable for killing the lamb is a result of the subject-predicate construction of language. Nietzsche argues that the "seduction of language" leads individuals to view "all actions as conditional upon an agency or subject" (26). To illustrate his point, he uses the example of the sentence "lightning flashes." Grammar would lead an individual to conclude that there is a subject (lightning) and a predicate (flashes). However, lightning is nothing without the flash. In this same sense, the bird of prey is nothing if

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it does not kill the lamb: the doer cannot be separated from the deed. When sufferers look for someone to blame, they fall victim to this same grammatical error. They see their suffering as a predicate, and a subject must be responsible for it. However, it is only grammar that has made sufferers think this way.

Nietzsche's critique of the sufferers' need to assign guilt is also concerned with how the sufferers' search for a guilty party can turn inward. Although sufferers may blame others for their condition, Nietzsche argues that it is also possible for sufferers to blame themselves. The key figure in this reversal is the ascetic priest. The ascetic priest is an individual who preaches the ascetic ideals of "poverty, humility, and chastity" (78) and whose domain is the "rule over the suffering" (92). Nietzsche argues that the suffering masses' search for a guilty party can be violent and dangerous. The ascetic priest acts as "the direction changer of *ressentiment*" who "defends his sick herd" (93) against themselves. He "detonates the explosive material" (93) of *ressentiment* by turning the sufferer's need to assign guilt inward. He tells sufferers, "you yourself alone are to blame for yourself" (94). In doing this, he renders sufferers harmless, promotes bad conscience, and organizes them into a religious structure of sin and guilt. The ascetic priest thus "soothes the pain" of suffering by providing sufferers a guilty party to blame but "poisons the wound at the same time" (93) by rendering sufferers more powerless.

The final important part of Nietzsche's critique is his argument that sufferers' need to assign guilt is self-destructive. Although Nietzsche admits that the effects produced by *ressentiment* are efficient in overwhelming suffering, he still sees them as "bad air" to humans (25). Nietzsche argues that the effects of *ressentiment* are purely reactions to powerlessness and are not genuine or original; they are merely the "self-deception of powerlessness" (27). In this self-deception, however, reactivity overwhelms the sufferer. The sufferer becomes deeply invested in his or her own powerlessness, "rankled by poisonous and hostile feelings" (21), and rendered incapable of action, liberation, or empowerment. The sufferer is thus paralyzed, embracing his or her powerlessness as the foundation of his or her identity.

Nietzsche's deconstructive approach to language is important in the construction of many of his arguments. One example of this approach is Nietzsche's exploration of word origins. Throughout the text, Nietzsche explores etymologies in an attempt to historically trace the evolution of concepts like conscience, law, and justice. One example of this that is relevant to his critique of sufferers and guilt is his investigation of the origin of the word "guilt." He identifies a likeness between the German words for guilt and debt, suggesting that guilt originally had no association to morality or bad conscience. Nietzsche thus suggests that many of the things we automatically accept in our society (for example, the relationship between guilt and a bad conscience) are drawn only from our experiences with language. His argument that language fundamentally affects our thinking calls into question the logic and value behind reactive tendencies like the need to assign guilt. Our reactions may not be logical or valuable, but rather

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the product of something as simple as a similarity between two words.

Another example of Nietzsche's deconstructive approach to language is his analysis of grammar. Nietzsche argues that the subject-predicate construction of sentences is the greatest deception of language. The construction of an actor and a deed leads an individual to see the two as something that can be separated. Nietzsche argues that in fact the actor only is what it does. One can interpret this to mean that Nietzsche is arguing that only verbs truly exist; nouns and subjects exist in grammar for merely practical purposes. This interpretation is evident in Nietzsche's critique of why the sufferer's need to assign guilt is self-destructive. If an individual is defined only by what he or she does and all he or she does is react to *ressentiment* in rage or righteousness, then the individual's identity will be defined only by these reactive affects. The individual will thus lose the capability for action or empowerment; powerlessness becomes their identity.

Nietzsche's figurative approach to language also plays an important role in the construction of his critique. Nietzsche's writing is extremely metaphorical. Unlike other philosophers of his time, Nietzsche does not approach his concepts in literal, straightforward terms. Instead, Nietzsche constructs elaborate metaphors. These metaphors include the lamb and the bird of prey, the sickness of the suffering masses, and the lightning flashing. The use of metaphor produces two important effects in Nietzsche's writing. First, his hypothetical, speculative narratives on the origins of concepts like guilt or morality are a good means of asking readers to examine the value of moral values or reactive tendencies by giving readers a jolting, fresh perspective. Second, the use of metaphor allows Nietzsche's work to be interpreted in a number of ways. In steadfastly refusing to approach his philosophy from a straightforward or literal approach, Nietzsche suggests that a concrete concept forecloses an idea while a metaphor allows the idea to live. Nietzsche's preference for the metaphor that is open to interpretation can be seen as a function of his distrust of faith in a single truth. In Nietzsche's work, nothing is fixed or can be deemed absolute.

Nietzsche's critique of the sufferer's need to assign guilt is a fascinating exploration of why humans have strong reactive tendencies and why these tendencies are in fact "bad air" to humans. Nietzsche's unique approach to language is critical in assessing the construction of his critique. His deconstructive yet figurative approach to language creates an argument that is analytical yet metaphorical, compelling yet open to interpretation, and scientific yet poetic. Through this approach, Nietzsche analyzes how the sufferer's need to assign guilt is an attempt to displace suffering with a more powerful affect, how this attempt can turn inward as a result of the ascetic priest redirecting *ressentiment*, and how this attempt overwhelms the sufferer's identity and becomes self-destructive.

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