Priestly Power and Damaged Life in Nietzsche and Adorno

Eric Sean Nelson

1. Questioning Suffering

The question of pain, of how pain permeates human existence and how to respond to it in its facticity—in order to live or not live, or to promote and intensify or to limit and inhibit life—is a central issue of the Genealogy of Morals. In this question, the possibility of an irreparable suffering, of a wound that can be called traumatic in that it is without closure or healing, emerges. This issue does not represent so much a concern with the pain of the delicate and sensitive, of the ostensible civilized Europeans who wither at the slightest exposure and which Nietzsche contrasts with the supposedly almost infinite toleration of pain of the beast and primitive (GM II.7), as it is with pain as suffering, i.e., a traumatic pain that not only lingers after its initial appearance but transforms how one animal relates to and experiences its world in sickness or in health. In the sense of its transfiguring force, as Elaine Scarry describes trauma as a making and unmaking of the world in The Body in Pain, traumatic suffering is as world-disclosing as a Greek temple or a painting of peasant shoes, even if it reveals a different world, and for Nietzsche it is more so. For Nietzsche, radical suffering cannot be eliminated and it is a dangerous symptom of religious and political

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utopianism to suggest that it can be (JGB II.44). How individuals, classes, peoples, and races respond to suffering differentiates and individuates them, and forms the basis of aristocratic or slavish, noble or priestly ways of life. Whereas the noble is skeptical and unafraid in the face of suffering, and “wants it to be, if anything, worse and greater than before”; the priestly fears it even as he uses and manipulates it, and is consequently always transfixed by it and beholden to it (JGB III.46; VII.225).

In the Untimely Meditations, Nietzsche described the power of forgetting to heal all wounds, allowing individuals and nations to act and achieve happiness (UB, 252). In Zarathustra, some passages continue this initial model of forgetting as healing, insofar as the noble, innocent, and creators do not and should not take suffering too seriously. Other passages, however, unfold a second model of suffering that increasingly displaces the first one in the 1880’s. There is a shift from forgetting to a kind of nobility, freedom, and ease in the face of even the worst suffering. Rather than innocent and child-like disregard, suffering is to be affirmed not in the name of its future compensation by God or the state but as potentially transformative and creative, i.e., as constitutive of the processes of life itself. Life is self-overcoming; according to Zarathustra, and it relentlessly wounds itself in order to procreatively transfigure itself (Za II.12).

This second model of embracing rather than displacing one’s suffering, that the greatest tragedies lead the courageous to honor life all the more (GD IX.18), is articulated in the context of Nietzsche’s unfolding polemic against theology, theodicy, and metaphysics, the anaesthetizing and other-worldly justification and excuse of suffering that promises its redemptive end and compensation in a transcendent beyond (Jenseits). Theodicy, the justification of God to humans through the legitimation of moral evil and physical suffering as part of God’s design, has a corresponding structure requiring acquiescence to social reality as a condition of felicity in its classical proponents such as Leibniz. Yet Nietzsche’s discourse, insofar as it continues to speak of Stendhal’s “promise of happiness” and of embracing one’s suffering by affirming it and its world, risks becoming its own theodicy in the guise of counter-theodicy—that is to say, now for the sake of life itself rather than God, a justification of and apology for the ways of the world, and its violence and affliction, to be willed and reaffirmed again and again. This is indeed Adorno’s conclusion in Minima Moralia. Whether Marxist or Nietzschean, he remarked, the radical critique of culture, ideology, and
morality itself becomes ideological (MM I.22). Past violence against oneself retains its grip on present virility, gratification, and self-affirmation, as former pain masochistically becomes stereotyped pleasures (MM I.24). Adorno contends that Nietzsche’s most trenchant criticism of Christianity is of its logic of sacrifice, “the sacrifice of the innocent for the sins of the guilty,” of the earth and the body for phantoms, and that *amor fati* inevitably repeats rather than dismantles this logic of sacrifice and its violence, never arriving at the promised redemption of immanence and innocence, of the body and the earth, which Nietzsche evocatively called for (MM II.61).

Nietzsche certainly vigorously rejected the claim that all pain is justifiable in the sense of its being deserved (GD VI.6), or due to sin or guilt, thus denying the foundation of theodicy, providence, and karma. Suffering is not holy or moral, it is often senseless and useless. Nonetheless, according to Adorno’s reading of Nietzsche, all pain is to some degree justified and to be accepted as part of life, including socially produced inequality and injustice, which are consequently naturalized as being life itself.

Despite this critique of Nietzsche’s apparent political implications, which moderates Adorno and Horkheimer’s appreciation for “the dark writers of the bourgeoisie” (DA 139), for whom equality and justice are affirmative instead of being merely tarantula-like revenge and resentment, Adorno’s appreciation of the relation of individual suffering and social violence, of pain and its role in reproducing and deepening the mechanisms of power, the effects of which he designates “damaged life,” retains a Nietzschean resonance. This can be traced in Adorno’s reflections on the Holocaust and the impossibility of theodicy, and in his ideology-critical explorations of suffering and authoritarian power in occultists and other damaged personalities such as newspaper astrologers and radio evangelists. Analogously, if not identically to Nietzsche, Adorno challenged the theodicy motif—irredeemable after Auschwitz—in both its elite and popular cultural forms as complicit with violence and suffering, while also himself risking reverting to theodicy in another guise in regard to Stendhal’s “promise of happiness,” which for both of these authors is implicit in art and aesthetic-sensual life (GM III.6; ΑΤ 26, 441).

Notwithstanding this reference to potential sensual and personal happiness, the guiding thread for social criticism, Adorno continues that “Art is the ever-broken promise of happiness” (ΑΤ 26, 441). Neither author can find satisfaction in the pursuit of pleasure in a hedonism that
avoids responding to the question of suffering, which itself remains paradoxically implicated in ascetic and disciplinary ideals and practices. In his *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presciently ridicules the contrived, banal, and agreeable pleasures of the last humans, for whom “Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same” (Za I.5). Adorno evoked his own variety of last human in *Minima Moralia* in the form of a consumeristic individualism that leaves room for neither happiness nor individuals, in which the ideology of the individual corresponds to her actual subordination and elimination as individual (MM I.39). Autonomy is destroyed in the name of freedom, democracy undermined in its promotion, and individuality eliminated in mass-produced individualism. Planned, instrumentalized, and calculated, all are the same.

Nietzsche depicted in the *Genealogy of Morals* the subordination, inversion, and reinterpretation of instincts and desires in socialization, processes involving great cruelty, mutilation, and suffering (GM II.16). These processes made humans interesting for the first time, and Nietzsche recognizes his own and Zarathustra’s proximity to the priestly character, yet they are increasingly dangerous to life and unwell (GM I.6; Za II.4). Such suffering and traumatic violence against the individual remains integral to socialization according to Adorno, who, as Tyrus Miller argues, analyzes the event of trauma and its transformation into the damaged life of mass consumerist societies, a trauma that remains recognizable in the obsessive repetition and compulsive behavior of collectively mesmerized individuals.3 Under such conditions, suffering is not liberated in unending pleasures, as promised in popular cultural images and advertising, but remains a subjected and orchestrated object under the aegis of the culture industry. Accordingly, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the mutuality of pleasure and discipline, spontaneity and domination, characteristic of modern societies is revealed most clearly not in its conservative and liberal apologists but in those who radically pursued the consequences and shadows of modernity, namely, the Marquis de Sade and Friedrich Nietzsche (DA 139).

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2. Priestly Power, Damaged Life, and Religious Culture

The current situation does not contradict the claim that religion is not only a religious question but a social-political one. Exemplifying a strategy that has been criticized by Paul Ricoeur as the "hermeneutics of suspicion," in that it challenges the interpretive priority of the self-understanding of believers, the young Karl Marx claimed in his *Theses on Feuerbach* that Feuerbach reduced religious alienation to its secular basis without understanding its social-political character. It is insufficient to analyze religion as false and an illusion, as the self-estrangement of consciousness and the theoretical attitude, if it is implicated in the reproduction of the dynamics of existing society, including its estrangement and injustices. Religion, as the "heart of a heartless world," both feeds off of and answers by reproducing that very estrangement in which the self does not recognize itself in its own activities in relation to things, others, and its own self. Religion consequently expresses both power and powerlessness. It calls people to accept their socially produced suffering as fated and ordained while concurrently giving a voice to that suffering, potentially expressing a protest against that damaged life. As Nietzsche also noted, religion is not only oppressive, it is itself an expression of oppressed life. Nietzsche seems to suggest at times that it is the latter that makes religion objectionable, whereas it is the former for Marx, and yet it is the double movement—i.e., the oppressiveness and self-oppression of the oppressed life—which Nietzsche articulated in the *Genealogy*.

Nietzsche's confrontation with religion's worldly context occurs most forcefully in the genealogical exposure of the lowly origins of religious discourses in phenomena such as exchange relations and in ascetic, disciplinary, and priestly practices. According to Nietzsche, religion does not subjugate the masses by being externally imposed on them, even if the priestly employ it in this fashion, this system of symbolic, ideological, and in many cases physical power is generated within and by the life-world itself. Nietzsche's analysis circumvents Marx's objection to Feuerbach, given that it does not humanistically challenge the religious ideal while avoiding its practical basis. It does more than this by revealing the dependency and conformity of religious life to be self-created by a self-unable to confront and embrace itself and its world. The relationship between priestly power and the masses thus serves as an exemplar of the

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heteronomy of social life, including secular priests leading complicit masses on the basis of their damaged affective lives in mass political movements.

To use the schema from the second *Untimely Meditation*, the *Genealogy of Morals* is a variety of “critical history,” albeit enacted in the name of instead of against present life. Yet, as critical, the question arises once more of Nietzsche’s relation to the priestly character and, as life, raises the difficulty, posed by Adorno, whether Nietzsche’s discourse of agonistic life is inherently apologetic in its call for *amor fati* and that every “it was” should become an “I will.” Does it offer an inverted worldly theodicy justifying the ways of the world, nature, and life to humans, encouraging them to accept their role and fate, or is it rather a variety of immanent self-cleansing critique? Does genealogical history uncritically conceal the present, and its immanent promise of and hope for happiness, or is it a relevant critical model for examining the intersection of power and suffering, or—in more social theoretical language—ideological elites and mechanisms of the reproduction and perpetuation of power? To respond to these questions, we should look more closely at the strategy and structure of Nietzsche’s portrayal of priestly power and sickly life in the *Genealogy* (GM I.6).

One can compare Nietzsche’s priestly figure to other portrayals of priestly power, such as Dostoevsky’s inquisitor, who employs devotion, faith, and fear to legitimate and perpetuate violence and domination. Nietzsche’s description does not contrast the priest with an exemplar of true religiosity nor is it a liberal narrative about the dangers of overly zealous religiosity. Radically engaging and questioning its psycho-social-political dynamics, Nietzsche intends to examine the historical constitution and formation of the religious soul itself, which, as Nietzsche remarked concerning Pascal in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is one that is deep, wounded, and monstrous; one shaped by a “multitude of dangerous, painful experiences” (BGE III.45). Although one should be careful about reducing Nietzsche’s thought to a variety of virtue ethics, passages like this illustrate how Nietzsche’s critique of morality and religion evokes the “good life” in a biological language of health and sickness, ascending and descending life.

It is from the perspective of a Nietzschean “good life,” which is not a life without damages and suffering but one that does not understand itself according to the fatality or “it is” of these damages, which enables Nietzsche’s examination and evaluation of various forms of life. Moral and religious discourses and practices function as reproductive mecha-
isms of ways of life that damages individuals at the same time as individuals are compelled to accept the damages done as good and justifiable.\(^5\) Through the ascetic ideal, suffering is interpreted in such ways as to reinforce and bring about more and new sufferings (GM III.28). Pain and suffering are not part of the contingent fabric of becoming but now “deserved”, due to the construction of life as guilt and sin, and pain itself becomes thereby both a need and a pleasure—for some the only remaining one—under the priestly regime (GM II.24; III.11).

The figure of the priest exposes violence against the instincts and the self, the trauma of a socialization that traumatizes life to make it malleable, and how these traumatic results of violence are concealed and deepened through a repetition that never realizes its purpose of healing the original wound. The pain is not only unhealed, it worsens in lingering pathologically without being either forgotten or encountered. Nietzsche’s ascetic priest and his secular heirs thus deal with pain and violence by not responding to their constitutive character as life. The reified self of a culture that damages individuals through socialization begins as a response to suffering, asceticism accordingly always promises the end of suffering. Yet it cannot redeem the suffering that it itself is. It is an answer that repeats, reinscribes, and intensifies suffering in denying the immanence of this world and this life—even as it attempts to assert absolute control over it—for the sake of a beyond or future devoid of resistance, conflict, and alterity. Consequently, Nietzsche writes, the priestly cure is worse than the disease (GM I.6) and “poisons the wound” (GM III.15), because this pain becomes resentment and is cultivated into a spirit of revenge and hostility towards what is other than oneself, including the good life itself (GM I.7; III.15). This intrigue and complicity of trauma and violence, of love and revenge, is embodied most emphatically in what Nietzsche described as the “gruesome paradox of a ‘god on the cross,’ that mystery of an inconceivable, final, extreme cruelty and self-crucifixion” (GM I.8).

Such cures, consolations, and theodicies do not recognize suffering as suffering. Instead they transform, justify, and “redeem” suffering by establishing it as meaningful, as relationships of exchange and debt, and as sacrificial demands. In Christianity, described by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy* as a kind of loan-sharking, all debts are alleged to be freely paid off. The debts are to be paid back to the same being that is employed to

establish individual actions as faults and sins in need of being paid off. Yet these debts cannot be paid in principle, since the debtor needs forgiveness and is not allowed to pay off her own debt through her own actions. The agent needs the intervention of the debt collector, who imposes an infinite obedience and guilt onto the debtor in assuming all debt. In being redeemed, the agent is reduced to an absolute debtor in taking on an infinite debt to the redeemer, and is expected to love this. Beyond the heteronomy of an unending debt constituted in its infinite forgiveness, the ascetic and priestly ideal remains captured in the sacrificial logic of the violence and trauma of its own origins. It cannot rescind suffering as it promises, since suffering is its primary basis and need. If this is the case, even if it takes on the form of the language of the oppressed rather than the oppressor, the logic of exchange and sacrifice implicit in religion inevitably undermines the weak messianic power or redemptive utopian dimension emphasized by Benjamin and Adorno. Through an infinitely demanding sacrificial logic, the hope characteristic of weak messianic power is lost in the long wandering and suffering of the burdened camel or goes under in the nihilism of messianic terror.