

# Nietzsche on the Knowledge of the Sufferer: A Contribution to the Philosophy of the Emotions\*

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## Introduction

Although the passions are important to Nietzsche, it is surprising the extent to which the topic is covered so little, and often superficially one might add, in the literature on him. In his writings we find thought-provoking treatments of a whole panoply of passions or emotions, including fear, hope, love, joy, pride, vanity, shame, sympathy, compassion, guilt, melancholy, and so on.<sup>1</sup> In a note from 1880 Nietzsche indicates the importance the passions have for him by observing that without the passions the world is reduced to

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\*This essay utilizes material forthcoming in Keith Ansell-Pearson & Rebecca Bamford, *Nietzsche's Dawn: Philosophy, Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Passion of Knowledge* (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), chapters one and five.

<sup>1</sup>Although there are affinities between the notions of passions, emotions, and affects I readily acknowledge one might also wish to draw attention to some subtle differences between them and to draw out their histories. This is something beyond the scope of this particular essay.

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simply 'quantity and line and law and nonsense' (KSA 9:7 [226]).<sup>2</sup> These are all things that, if this is all that existed, would rigidify life and turn it into something strictly mechanical, automatic, predictable, regular, and even boring.

Perhaps in accordance with this insight on Nietzsche's part, Robert Solomon has argued that Nietzsche attacks philosophy's modern emphasis on epistemology and seeks to return philosophy to its true vocation as a doctrine of the passions.<sup>3</sup> For Solomon, the title of the text *The Gay Science* signals a defence of the passionate life, since *la gaya scienza* is a life of longing and love. Solomon's idea of Nietzsche as a 'passionate defender of the passionate life' – a thinker who wanted to promote living with passion and who writes from the perspective of the passions and not from the supposedly objective perspective of reason and rationality and offers an *unrestrained* defence of them – requires a great deal of qualification since Nietzsche's views on the passions are far subtler and decidedly more complex than this. Nietzsche's art of the passions is an intricate and delicate one; it is an art that accords an important role to reason and the need for sober and calm reflection. In considering his thinking about the passions, as on many other subjects or topics, we need to take cognizance of both his philosophical complexity and his philosophical dexterity. For an appreciation of Nietzsche on the importance of reason in life, one need only refer to the portrait of Epictetus we encounter in *Dawn* where Nietzsche makes clear that he esteems this Stoic figure on account of the fact that 'he believes rigorously in reason' and that he 'is no teacher of penitence' (D 546).

In short, I do not find it at all clear what it means to say, as Solomon does, that philosophy's 'true vocation' lies in it being a 'doctrine of the passions'. This strikes me as a fanciful conception of philosophy both with respect to its origins and its history. It does not capture in any incisive or faithful way the actual character of Nietzsche's own conception of philoso-

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<sup>2</sup>*Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (München/Berlin & New York, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag/Walter de Gruyter, 1967-77 & 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great "Immoralist" Has to Teach Us* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 63.

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phy or his principal modes of philosophical practice. In his middle writings such as *Dawn*, for example, Nietzsche is a critical sceptic and Enlightenment thinker who appeals, above all, to the need for *science and reason*. In one aphorism in *Dawn*, for example, entitled 'Do not turn passion into an argument for truth!', Nietzsche – with caustic wit and an effort to produce intellectual alarm in his reader – explicitly and vigorously attacks those who want to abandon themselves to the passions and so partake in a 'depravity of the intellect', and that manifests itself in an arrogant disdain for 'criticism, science, and reason' (D 543).

How you thirst for these moments where in your own mind your passion bestows upon you categorical right and as it were innocence, where in battle, intoxication, anger, hope you are beside yourselves and beyond all doubt, where you decree "anyone who is not beside himself as we are cannot possibly know what and where truth lies!" How you thirst to find people of your belief in this state – it is the state of depravity of the intellect – and to ignite your flames at their fires! Oh your despicable martyrdom! Your despicable victory of the sanctified lie! Must you cause yourselves so much suffering? — Must you? — (D 543)

## **Nietzsche on the Knowledge of the Sufferer: Emotions and Moods**

The focus for my reflections here is one particular aphorism in Nietzsche's corpus that appears to be especially instructive with respect to the task of determining the nature of Nietzsche's contribution to a philosophy of the emotions: aphorism 114 from book two of *Dawn*. In this aphorism, Nietzsche negotiates a delicate and subtle appraisal of various emotions (including pride, contempt, and anger) in the context of a particular, and powerfully drawn, case study: that of a person experiencing a fundamental estrangement

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from life who ultimately experiences a deepened and affectively re-oriented re-attachment to life.

According to Rüdiger Safranski, Nietzsche was 'a master of shading the particular tinge, color, or mood of experience' and someone who used their own solitude and suffering as a springboard to construct a new philosophy, often providing exquisite depictions of the world while racked with pain. Moreover, Nietzsche is not content with mere expression and self-expression, but rather uses the example of his own experience to probe new and challenging questions. As Safranski rightly notes, Nietzsche is 'a passionate singularist' in the sense that for him the world is composed of nothing but details; even the self can be approached in such terms, that is, as a detail that is composed of further details. In the analysis of the detail there is no point of completion or termination: "There are only details, and although they are everything, they do not constitute a whole. No whole could encompass the plethora of details."<sup>4</sup> By paying attention to the details of existence we may discover ourselves in ways that surprise and enlighten us. As Nietzsche likes to point out, the journey of self-discovery has consequences that are frightful and fearful at one and the same time. Nietzsche's opening up of thinking in texts such as *Dawn*, and later in *The Gay Science*, to great currents, oceanic expanses, and departures for new shores, is metaphorical imagery by which he intends to explore the vast unknown territory of human consciousness and existence (e.g. D 575).

We find this attention to experience, and especially the importance of forging a link that between experience and knowledge, in *Dawn* 114 on the 'sufferer's knowledge' (*Von der Erkenntniss des Leidenden*). It is in *Dawn*, in fact, that Nietzsche suggests that in order to fully pursue knowledge as a passion, and partake of its adventure, the thinker needs to make himself vulnerable to all kinds of experience, and this viewpoint reflects his predilection for thinkers whose lives display what he calls a 'passionate history of the soul'.

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<sup>4</sup>R. Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: Norton & Co, 2002), p. 210.

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Here he mentions the likes of Spinoza, Rousseau, Pascal, and Goethe. By contrast, Kant's philosophical existence is too much of the 'head' and reflects a life governed by rigidity, whilst Schopenhauer's philosophical existence is the mirror of a 'character', albeit one characterised by an interesting vehement ugliness (D 481). What Nietzsche prizes, then, are the lives of thinkers where we find a philosophical existence punctuated by crises and catastrophes, and with respect to this we ought to duly note his reflections on his own intellectual development in *Ecce Homo*, where he reveals that *Human, all too Human* is 'the monument to a crisis' and that idealism had until that point been the great curse of life and that it was the experience of *illness* that brought him to *reason* (EH 'Human, all too Human').<sup>5</sup>

There has been one concerted reading of *Dawn* 114 in the literature on Nietzsche, and that I wish to take cognizance of. Jaanus Soovali interprets the aphorism by locating in it the origins of Nietzsche's 'affirmation of life'.<sup>6</sup> This approach yields important insights into important aspects of Nietzsche's thinking, and the reading he develops pays close attention to what Nietzsche is saying about pride in the aphorism and is especially instructive on this. Ultimately, Soovali, by reading the aphorism in the context of an appreciation of the subsequent aphorisms – 115 and 116 – seeks to argue that one cannot simply select one aphorism from the writings, separating it from its larger context, and then interpreting it as the crystallization of Nietzsche's philosophical position. From this he thinks we can advance an important principle that needs to inform how we read Nietzsche, so he writes: 'In the end, it seems to come down to being conscious of the fact that every (genealogical) analysis of oneself and others rests on uncertainty and inexhaustibility. Hence, Nietzsche brings considerable uncertainty into every possible discourse, including his own'.<sup>7</sup> For him, then, this is the chief lesson the reader needs to

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<sup>5</sup>F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Jaanus Soovali, 'Origin of the Affirmation of Life? The 'Dialectic of Suffering, Pride, and Affirmation in *Daybreak* 114', Celine Denat and Patrick Wotling (eds.), *Aurore : un tournant dans l'oeuvre de Nietzsche* (Éditions et presses de l'université de Reims, 2015), pp. 329-343.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 340.

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take away with himself or herself from their encounter with *Dawn* 114. Although I think Soovali is making an important point with respect to how we need to read Nietzsche as a thinker and writer, my appreciation of the aphorism is different: to my mind, the lesson of the aphorism is not a genealogical one. Instead, one can identify in the aphorism an important contribution to an understanding of the emotions. In addition, we are not left by the end of the aphorism suspended in uncertainty as Soovali suggests; rather, something important has been learned by the sufferer and by us the readers of the aphorism: a spiritual growth – let's call it a deepening of the self and of its being in the world – has taken place.

In this quite stunning aphorism on the sufferer's knowledge – stunning on account of the brilliance of its phenomenological description and the incisiveness of its psychological insights – Nietzsche seeks to draw out the value for knowledge of the condition of the infirm who are tormented for long periods by their suffering but whose minds remain unclouded (perhaps he is writing from his own experiences). Such experiences, and insights into them, are of value because they come from profound solitude and release one from all duties and customs, including customary habits of seeing the world and being in the world. Nietzsche writes:

From within this condition the heavy sufferer looks *out* onto things with a terrifying coldness: for him all those little deceitful enchantments in which things usually swim when regarded by the healthy eye disappear. Supposing that until that point he was living in some sort of dangerous fantasy world: this supreme sobering up through pain is the means to tear him out of it. He thinks back with contempt on the warm, cosy, misty world in which the healthy person lives his life without a second thought; he thinks back with contempt on the most noble and cherished illusions in which he used to indulge himself in days gone by. (D 114)

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In the experience Nietzsche is describing in this aphorism, it is the “prodigious straining” of the intellect that wants to resist the pain that ensues from the experience of feeling alienated and withdrawn from familiar life (the “warm, cosy, misty world”). Even in this extreme condition, then, the sufferer can resist the temptation to suicide and want to continue living; such is the mind’s fascination with what it is now experiencing. Indeed, the sufferer experiences only contempt for this warm and cosy world in which the unreflective, healthy person lives. As a counterweight to the physical pain now being felt, the sufferer conjures up this attitude of contempt from the “deepest hell” and that causes what is his greater bitter suffering, namely, that of his *soul*. The sufferer thus feels compelled to wrestle with their suffering and ultimately seeks to prove equal to the experience they are undergoing. They become their own accuser and executioner in the process, recognising their own complicity in their experience, which involves a “capricious pleasure” and “tyrannical arbitrariness”. Now they can elevate themselves above their life and their suffering and “look down into the depths of meaning and meaninglessness!”

At this point the sufferer experiences pride, which is the pride of opposing the tyrant that is pain and that wishes to overwhelm us and devour all our attention – and attachment – to life. Against the tyrant the sufferer wants to be life’s advocate. Nietzsche then adds:

In this state, one resists to the death all pessimism lest it appear to be a *consequence* of our state and humiliates us as one who has been defeated. By the same token, the appeal of exercising justness in judgement has never been greater than now, for now it constitutes a triumph over ourselves and over the most sensitive of all states. We find ourselves in veritable paroxysms of pride... (D 114)

We might suppose that such an altered – and alienated - state of consciousness can bring with it the possibility of a new just “judgement” on the self and world, affording us insights into existence that are simply not available to us

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in our normal, everyday and habitual comportment. However, Nietzsche is honest enough with himself and his readers to draw attention to the limits of such an experience:

And then comes the first twilight glimmer of alleviation, recovery – and almost the first effect is that we resist the supremacy of our pride; we call it foolish and vain – as if we had experienced anything! Without gratitude, we humble the almighty pride that had just allowed us to endure pain and we vehemently demand antidotal venom for our pride: we want to become estranged from ourselves and depersonalized after the pain has made us *personal* too forcefully and for too long a time. (D 114)

In short, is the pride not just a malady like any other? Does it not need to be humbled? Does the self not need to exercise in this life situation, with its recognition of specific alienated moods it is experiencing and that are informing its conception of the world, some humility? This is precisely what Nietzsche is advising in the aphorism, and now comes the final dramatic twist in his portrayal of the sufferer’s knowledge. It is now returned to life in a new and surprising way, with its senses restored and the appreciation of life deepened:

We begin to pay attention again to people and to nature – with a more longing eye: smiling ruefully, we remember that we now have come to know certain things about them in a new and different way than before, that a veil has fallen – but it *restores* us so as to view once more the *subdued lights of life* and to step out of the horrible, sober brightness in which, as a sufferer, we saw and saw through things. We don’t grow angry when the enchantments of health resume their play – we look on as if transformed, kind and still weary. In this state, one cannot listen to music without weeping. (D 114)

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Here Nietzsche depicts in a subtle and varied manner the way our consciousness functions, involving an initial detachment from life and a new reattachment to life. We see through the illusions that characterize normal life, but then, having withdrawn from them and having become divorced and estranged from practical life, we are filled with a new longing for them and there comes into being an appreciation of life that is ultimately deeper and richer in sensitivity and knowledge. As Nietzsche points out, there is a need to get outside and beyond our own personhood — a need to become “depersonalized,” as he puts it — since in an experience of profound suffering, pain traps us for too long in ourselves and makes us “*personal* too forcefully and for too long a time” (D 114). We should also note just how brilliantly, displaying real philosophical subtlety and dexterity, Nietzsche is drawing the reader’s attention to how our differing and varied attitudes towards existence reflect our own emotional condition at any given time, such as our moods and our life situation. As he so astutely observes, one’s “pessimism” about life and one’s existence may be little more than a reflection of our own state of being, as opposed to a correct or adequate appreciation, even representation, of the world as it actually is. “Pessimism” about life is something we have the *freedom* to wrestle with and, through the experience of an enriched appreciation that is acquired through some actual experience, defeat. Nietzsche is *not* being didactic about the issue of pessimism here; rather, he is raising a suspicion in order to provoke his reader into genuine reflection.

The insights Nietzsche provides into our emotional life in this aphorism are not intended to be either definitive or exhaustive: they do not pretend to be and we should not take them as such. And although Nietzsche may well be drawing upon his own experiences of pain and suffering in the aphorism, the insights he is developing into the emotions are not reducible to personal experience. What he says at the end about listening to music and finding oneself weeping, for example, does not express a personal idiosyncrasy on his part, but is an experience with which many readers will be able to readily connect. Indeed, this reveals something true about reaching a mature state in one’s experience of life in which one can appreciate on an emotional level the

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complexity of the human experience of life. Our experience is often deepened exactly in the way Nietzsche describes, in those situations where we find ourselves, often unwittingly, alienated from life. We weep when we hear music, then, because we have understood something poignant about life and our reaction to it. We may have learned, for example, that life is a tender and gentle thing, and that the people and things that populate existence are still be valued even when we have withdrawn from our gaze the typical veils of cosy enchantment that serve to cover over the fact that life is harsh, cruel, and may not at all be something gay. As the art form par excellence of the emotions or feelings, music has the capacity to magnify for us, in an incredibly powerful way, the experiences we have lived through, endured, and overcome. At the end of the aphorism we find the sufferer feeling kind and weary, and music is part of their restoration of health as they once again become receptive to the intensities of life. When we thus weep to music perhaps we are expressing a certain gratitude towards life, as well as experiencing a fundamental sympathy both with life and with ourselves. There is obviously an important movement that has taken place in the example Nietzsche provides in this aphorism, which might be construed in terms of a spiritual maturation, in which the sufferer is transformed from a position of intellectual conceit-ness to one anchored in a recognition of the “rich ambiguity of existence”, as Nietzsche sometimes like to express it (see, for example, GS 373, and also the treatment of the *Sinn* of music there).

### Conclusion

Let me conclude by spelling out what I think is the contribution to an understanding of the emotions and of our experience of life Nietzsche is making in the aphorism. First, there is, as I have already mentioned, the insight Nietzsche is developing into the nature of one’s experience of a deep pessimism about life and his suggestion that this can be understood by reflecting on one’s moods, in particular the mood one might find oneself in when undergoing the kind of experiences he is outlining in the aphorism, notably the



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experience of suffering from life. Second, there is the extraordinarily powerful insight Nietzsche develops about the need, in recovering from such an experience, to *depersonalize* the self. Nietzsche says this because here the self is precisely the problem. It is such in the sense that it is too attached to the experience it is undergoing and being subjected to; the self is, one might say, always in danger of feeding off its emotions, living too closely to them. Nietzsche is thus appealing to the need, should we wish to work through and conquer our experience of suffering and the way it afflicts us, of gaining a distance from the experience and ourselves, of going outside and beyond the self. In this way, we can exercise a high degree of subtle and appropriate reason in dealing with the experience and understanding exactly its meaning or significance. In short, on my reading Nietzsche is providing his reader in this aphorism with a quite specific set of insights into the character of a particular emotional experience, and in this case study he makes a remarkable contribution to our conception of what a philosophy of the emotions needs to focus its attention on. He does this with the clarity and power of a very precise description of a particular life experience.