

Explain and evaluate Nietzsche's reasons for devaluing the emotion of pity.

Leo Franchi

Nietzsche's views on pity brook little room for misunderstanding. He completely rejects the value of pity, and furthermore rejects morality based on virtue or compassion. He sees pitying as a weakness, something that those who are unaccustomed to pain feel in response to the pain and suffering of others. Acts of pity are inherently unequal, he argues, as they engender a sharp distinction between the pitier, who gains superiority, and the pitied, who is degraded. Furthermore, pity simply increases the amount of suffering in the world, by forcing the pitier to shoulder an extra burden of pain. Nietzsche, in rejecting the use of pity, cleanly and comprehensively breaks from Schopenhauer's account of morality. In relying on compassion, Nietzsche argues, Schopenhauer fails to accurately account for the full psychological complexity of pity and as a result does not understand the danger in pitying. As a result of his emphatic view of the role of pity, there have been various different interpretations and analyses. The critical take of Foot and Glover, tying Nietzschean ethics to fascism, the calmer view explained by Kaufmann, and the alternate interpretation proposed by Nussbaum all take the same fundamental idea in different directions.

Nietzsche's attack on pity takes many forms. The first is that he does not see pity as an altruistic action. Acts of pity are not selfless, where the pitier feels for the pitied with no regards to himself. Instead, the pitier is subconsciously thinking of himself, and acts not out of pure selflessness but rather to eliminate some sort of internal pain. "That at bottom we are thinking very strongly of ourselves can be divined from the decision that we arrive at in every case in which we *can* avoid the sight of the person suffering, perishing or complaining: we decide *not* to do so if we can present ourselves as the more powerful and as a helper, if we are certain of applause," (D 133) The reasoning behind this action is to resolve some personal pain or to pose ourselves in some powerful position with regard to the pitied. Furthermore, for Nietzsche, pity is nothing more than a weakness, and those who pity are merely those who are less accustomed to pain. By showing pity for another individual, the pitier is showing vulnerability and the inability to weather the emotions he is experiencing. Those who do not pity "find that being soft-hearted is painful for them, just as maintaining a stoic indifference is painful for men of pity." (D 134) The difference between men who pity and men who do not pity does not lie in a fundamental moral evaluation, Nietzsche argues, but rather in a "moral fashion," as the current trends of morality lend weight to the pitiers.

Pity, not only showing weakness and selfishness, also increases the amount of suffering in the world. By causing suffering in the pitier, as well as already existing in the pitied, it multiplies the amount of suffering for no reason. Nietzsche argues that all the good in the world that comes from pitying is easily dwarfed by the amount of pain it causes, for "supposing it were dominant for even a single day, mankind would immediately perish of it." (D 134) This rather pessimistic view of the benefits of pitying relies on the argument that pitying is unable to be positive, for only in very rare cases does it create happiness rather than increase suffering. Pity is also, fundamentally, a power relation between the pitied and the pitier, and is often connected with revenge if not cruelty. Something as simple as feeling pity for a beggar on the street, Nietzsche would explain, contains within it the seeds of contempt and superiority. Nietzsche claims what is to be feared is *compassion*, for as the pitier gazes in on himself, "On such a ground of self-contempt, a real quagmire, every weed will grow, every poisonous plant," (GM III 14) This self-contempt is the basis of hatred against the world, a world that is harsh and full of suffering (Nussbaum, 1994).

But the strongest argument Nietzsche makes against the corruptive power of pity is in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche paints a picture of man as a sickly, huddled together, herd-like

mass. The sickliness of man is multifaceted, and he is tamed by the internalization of emotions, as well as the slave-morality that has developed in society. This great mass of the weak has a shepherd, the ascetic priest, who “embodies the desire for another existence, somewhere else, is even the highest form of this desire, its real intensity and passion.” (GM III 13) He is the one who walks in from of them and guides them. This division of humanity, with the greatest majority sick and weak, led by the ascetic priests, provides the most permanent danger to Nietzsche’s great men. These sickly masses, resentful of the power of the strong, are the ones who have the greatest ability to harm the strong men, “mankind’s *strokes of luck*,” those who have been able to overthrow themselves. The herd poses the greatest danger to these men, Nietzsche claims, for “those who are from the outset victims, downtrodden, broken—they are the ones, the *weakest* are the ones who most undermine life among men, who most dangerously poison and question our trust in life, in man.” (GM III 14) The tool that the can tie the real men of Nietzsche’s vision down to the herd is the combination of *disgust* and *compassion*—for as soon as the strong feel compassion, or pity, and as a result of that guilt, they are tossed back into that which they had escaped. These “men of *ressentiment*, these deformed and maggot-ridden men, [...] without doubt succeeded in forcing their own misery, the whole of misery as such *into the conscience* of the fortunate.” (GM III 14) This provides the harshest critique yet that pity is fundamentally a terrible act that has the possibility of destroying the fortunate.

The validity, however, of some of these reasons for devaluing pity is not completely clear. Nietzsche states that pity is never selfless, that there is always a strong subconscious reason behind every pitying act. His reasoning for this is that the only time a person chooses to act out of pity, for example, to save a drowning man in a river, is when the act itself would empower or honour the pitier. But is this the only possible cause of an act of pity? It seems to be too vast a claim to make categorically. Any example that could shed doubt on his claim would undermine his absolute assertion. Additionally, his argument for the increasing of suffering as a result of pitying is not very strong. There may well be societies in which the role of pity has not created more suffering than it started from—but by not even considering this option, Nietzsche is blind to potential criticisms and ignores the issue altogether. (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 157).

Nietzsche’s vehement denial of the value of pity comes as a response to Schopenhauer’s own morality, which in turn is a reflection of the rejection of pity exhibited by Kant. Nietzsche, while sharply critical of Kant, shared some understanding of the perils of pity. As Cartwright states,

“both Nietzsche and Kant maintain that one of the problems with pity is that it usurps the agent’s autonomy. Nietzsche argues that in being manipulated and controlled by the recipient of pity, an agent may lose autonomy in two ways. The agent is made to suffer [...] The notion of self-control is the basic idea behind Kant’s conception of autonomy. Kant argued that to be autonomous it was necessary for agents to be free from external forces which compel their behavior.(Cartwright, 1984, p. 86)

In the same vein, the loss of control and autonomy is anathema to Nietzsche, because his ideal of the strong man who has overcome himself is not beholden to any other individual—so his autonomy is essential.

Schopenhauer, however, held a completely opposing view. For him, compassion is the *criterion*, the basis, for moral worth in the first place. The amount that an act can be valued is directly linked to the absence of any egoistic motive—so compassion, which is nothing more than “sympathetic pity,” forms the very origin of Schopenhauer’s morality. Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer says pity “is the same kind of thing as the suffering at the sight of which it arises, or that it possesses an especially subtle, penetrating understanding of suffering,” and that these “are propositions contradicted by *experience*,

and he who glorifies pity precisely on account of these two qualities *lacks* adequate experience in this very realm of the moral.” (D 134) Nietzsche is claiming here that Schopenhauer is using a historical argument that has no true basis in history, for he is relying on the fact that all past societies had a positive view of pity. However, as Nietzsche points out, both the Stoics and the Epicureans had no room for pity in their philosophies. This is, however, not the only criticism Nietzsche has of Schopenhauer’s positing of compassion as the source of every moral action. He asserts that Schopenhauer had a superficial understanding of what he believes to be a much more complicated psychological phenomenon of pity. Schopenhauer’s idea of pity was “imperfectly observed,” and “poorly described,” and essentially it is a much more complex phenomenon than a selfless desire for another person’s well-being (Cartwright, 1984, p. 95).

But Nietzsche is merely substituting Schopenhauer’s absolute concrete foundation of compassion and pity with his own completely comprehensive denunciation of the value of pity. He claims that Schopenhauer’s argument requires there to be no society in which pity was seen as negative, but his own argument is susceptible to the existence of any society in which pity plays a positive, or at least not negative, role. The ease with which he criticizes Schopenhauer here seems to be misleading, for he leaves himself open to the very same problem. A more nuanced view of pity, which did not hold it as being a fundamentally incorrigible poison, would allow him to attack Schopenhauer while retaining some shred of defence. This, however, would weaken his underlying argument where pity is consistently pigeonholed as a completely and utterly worthless emotion.

A further criticism of Nietzsche’s philosophical framework regarding pity revolves around the fact that he makes different categorical claims about pity and slave morality. While he does strongly condemn slave morality for holding down the great majority of people, and explains how it twists what used to be negative terms, such as weakness and fear, into positive ones, like humility, he also says that *for most people*, it is fine. It is only when it corrupts the few that are strong, the few that have the capability to be more, then it is something which is to be thrown away and overcome. However when it comes to pity he has no such graduated scale. Pity is bad for all, and it is inherently tied up with bad conscience that he believes everyone should free themselves from. Why, for him, slave morality is acceptable as a consolation for the weak and sickly masses, but at the same time pity is categorically bad, is not fully clear.

We have seen here how Nietzsche’s critical view of pity springs partly from his fundamental disagreement with Schopenhauer on both the role of pity in morality and the depth of the psychological act of pitying itself. In looking at the value of his stance on pity, it is interesting to note that there are multiple completely different interpretations of the role pity plays in his philosophy. Philippa Foot and Jonathan Glover expound one interpretation that characterizes Nietzsche as supporting a strong, callous, individual with no concern for the well-being of others. Not only does this human being profess indifference to others’ pain, but he draws strength and pleasure from others’ suffering. Walter Kaufmann provides a very different view of Nietzsche’s goal, portraying him almost as a Christian moralist, more out to correct the wrongs of Christianity than completely overturn it (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 140). However, I think the most interesting view is the one that Nussbaum explains, and she differs in both of these respects by her emphasis on the Stoic influence on Nietzsche.

Nussbaum presents Nietzsche’s morality as a sort of stoicism. As well as the critique of pity, Nussbaum claims that in *A Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche finds praise for mercy. In particular, she explains how for Nietzsche, as for the Stoic Seneca, “punishment is a form of exchange.” (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 154) This exchange mutates as the wisdom and power of the injured party grows. At the start, Nietzsche explains, a society will punish a transgression by expulsion. But as the society grows to become more

powerful, to be more wise, it lessens the punishment for each crime. The evildoer poses less and less threat to the existence and well-being of the society, and so instead of rejecting the evildoer the society begins to pull him closer. Nietzsche ends this discussion by claiming

“it is not impossible to conceive of a society whose *consciousness of power* would allow it the most refined luxury there is—that of allowing those who do it harm to go *unpunished*. [...] This self-cancellation of justice: the beautiful name it goes by is well enough known—*grace*; needless to say, it remains the prerogative of the most powerful man, even better, his domain beyond the law. (GM II 10)

Additionally, this man who has overcome himself is required to be stoic and merciful in order to avoid the attempts of the herd to corrupt him with pity, guilt, and anger. So this “most powerful man” deals with an enemy not by retaliating, but by teaching. There is no pity to be found in this picture, but neither is there contempt or unnecessary violence. (Nussbaum, 1994)

We have explored how Nietzsche rejects pity on various grounds, from criticising how pity is weakness and vulnerability to how it increases suffering in the world. Fundamentally, however, his criticism of pity is irrevocably tied to his distinction between the slavish herd and the strong independent man. He provides a compelling argument for the poisonous role of pity, and although it is possible to dismiss some of his most inflammatory reasons for devaluing it, it is hard to completely dismiss it without tearing down the rest of his outlook on the rest of society and humanity itself. I do not think these attacks on his valuation of pity provide enough ground for throwing away his whole framework for the history of humanity. While some of his points fail to be convincing, ultimately more solid critical ground is needed to use the devaluing of pity as a beginning to dismantling his philosophy.

References

- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1997). *Daybreak*. Ed. by R. J. Hollingdale (tr.) Maudemarie Clark Brian Leiter. Cambridge University Press.
- (1996). *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Ed. by (tr.) Douglas Smith. Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (1994). “Pity and Mercy, Nietzsche’s Stoicism”. In: *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*. Ed. by Richard Schacht. University of California Press.
- Cartwright, David E. (1984). “Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche on the Morality of Pity”. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45.1, pp. 83–98.