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## AFFIRMING THE PANDEMIC OR AVERSION TO LIFE? A NIETZSCHEAN ASSESSMENT

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**Abstract:** This paper is a reflection on the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on social life and draws on Nietzsche's views on pessimism, will to power and affirmation. The question that lies at its centre is what it means to experience the pandemic with an affirmative or a life-negating attitude. It aims to open up a space for discussion for how the pandemic actually is or can possibly be experienced affirmatively. In order to do so, first of all it provides an outline of Nietzsche's analysis of the ancient Greek culture and the Greek myth of the wisdom of Silenus and secondly Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal. Lastly, putting the two topics side by side, it explores reactions towards the current pandemic on a scale of economy ranging from preservation to enhancement.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus Pandemic, Pessimism, Will to Power, Affirmation, Life-Denial.

## PANDEMİYİ OLUMLAMAK YA DA HAYATA YÜZ ÇEVİRMEK: NIETZSCHECİ BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

**Öz:** Bu makalede Nietzsche'nin kötümserlik, güç istenci ve yaşamı olumlama görüşlerinden hareketle Koronavirüs pandemisinin sosyal hayat üzerine etkileri irdelenmektedir. Pandeminin yaşamı olumlayıcı ya da yadsıyıcı bir yaklaşımla karşılanmasının ne anlama geldiği çalışmaya yön veren merkezi sorudur. Bu yanıt arayışı ile pandeminin halihazırda ya da mümkün olan hangi biçimlerde olumlanabileceği üzerine bir tartışma alanının yaratılması amaçlanmaktadır. Bunu yapabilmek için öncelikle Nietzsche'nin antik Yunan kültürü ve Silenos mitini yorumlayışı, ardından Nietzsche'nin çileci ideali eleştirisi ele alınmaktadır. Son olarak, bu iki analiz yan yana koyularak insanlığın Koronavirüs pandemisine verdiği tepkinin Nietzsche'nin güç istenci anlayışına dayalı bir ölçek üzerinden değerlendirmesi yapılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Koronavirüs Pandemisi, Kötümserlik, Güç İstenci, Yaşamı Olumlama, Yaşamı Yadsıma

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## 1. Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic continues to destabilize life all over the world for almost two years now. Initially perceived as an epidemic limited to certain regions of the Far East, it did not take much time before the virus spread to the farthest parts of the globe. Since then it has affected the interconnected life cycles on earth – frequently in unpredictable ways – as well as social life when it comes to the sphere of humans. As regards human life, with the pandemic we found ourselves compelled to change our daily routines, update long-established procedures in health-care systems and work life, transform methods of education, social interaction and the like. Above all, we had to reconsider our values. On the individual level, although people all over the world have gone through the negative impacts of the pandemic in varying degrees and different ways, it has at the same time been commonly experienced as a disruption of our assumptions, expectations and future prospects. Almost no aspect of our lives has been left untouched by the pandemic, ranging from daily routines such as handshaking and hugging as forms of greeting to spaces that are dear to us, from our jobs to our lives and the lives of loved ones ... As many of us have at some point come to acknowledge, the pandemic has shown how much we have taken for granted and how much we are now under the risk of losing.

The impact of the pandemic on human experience has been scrutinized by thinkers in different aspects. Referring to the pandemic as “seismic shift”, Havi Carel, Matthew Ratcliffe and Tom Froese offer adopting a phenomenological point of view to bring to light those aspects of experience that have been disrupted by social distancing measures (Carel, Ratcliffe and Froese, 2020: 87). They refer to all those that the pandemic brought to our lives in its train as “global uncertainty” and to the whole pandemic experience as “dismantling of the everyday”, meaning

the loss of a once prereflective trust or confidence relating to most things in our lives. This does not concern specific situations or places. Rather, it envelops one's experience of, and engagement with, the world as a whole. (*ibid.*)

Nathan Eckstrand of the American Philosophical Association Blog insists that in the middle of this loss we must ask not only what to do, but also the question of who we are now. Though he thinks that the natural inclination will be to reject or push away the second question (Eckstrand, 2020). Others such as Bruno Latour point to the impact of the pandemic on the world economic system and ecology, inviting us to think about the lessons that can be learnt from the pandemic. Latour famously said that “[i]f I could change one thing, it would be to get out of the system of production and instead build a political ecology” (Latour, 2020).

My aim in this paper is to further reflect on the impacts of the pandemic from a philosophical point of view by drawing on Nietzsche's views on pessimism, will to power and affirmation. The question that lies at the centre of this work is what it means to experience the pandemic with an affirmative or a life-negating attitude and the aim is to open up a space for discussion for how the pandemic actually is or can possibly be

experienced affirmatively. In my attempt to shed light on these issues, I will firstly outline Nietzsche's analysis of the ancient Greek culture and the Greek myth of the wisdom of Silenus and secondly his critique of the ascetic ideal. Lastly, putting the two topics side by side, I will explore reactions towards the current pandemic on a scale of economy ranging from preservation to enhancement. The paper will conclude by arguing that although it may be hard to see amidst all those losses, incorporating an affirmative attitude vis-à-vis the pandemic bears a potential for transformation and also for creating a future without getting stuck in the past. I believe such a perspective has a lot to offer us: the most important of all is perhaps that living through the pandemic not by yearning for the past but instead replacing such yearning by a desire for a radically different future is the means by which this potentially devastating phenomenon can be experienced as an opportunity and this can enable us to create a healthy post-pandemic life.

## 2. The Wisdom of Silenus and the Pandemic

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche famously refers to the myth of the wisdom of Silenus to lay the foundations for his rather unique exploration of the ancient Greek culture.<sup>1</sup> As he reports, the ancient myth is that King Midas finally captures the wood-god Silenus and asks him to tell "the best and most desirable of all things for man" (Nietzsche, 2000b: §3)<sup>2</sup>. Forced to answer the question, Silenus warns his listeners that what he is about to tell is in fact not at all convenient for them to hear and then he declares that what is best for human beings is not to have been born – something unattainable – and the second best for them is to die soon (*ibid.*). Silenus has two offers both of which refer to non-existence as the most desirable thing for human beings. Actually, this applies to the whole human species as Silenus addresses the whole species in his woe: "wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery" (*ibid.*).

Nietzsche considers this myth as the manifestation of an absolute pessimism in Greek culture of the time and argues that such a pessimistic view of life has a vast potential for paralysis, or an aversion to life. However, let us note that Nietzsche's understanding of pessimism does not denote giving up living or no more making effort, and as we all know, the ancient Greek society proved itself to be far away from getting stuck in a destructive type of pessimism when we think about all the legacy they left to future generations.

I argue that the pandemic has placed us into a similar context as the ancient Greeks vis-à-vis the Silenus myth, aside from the fact that we moderns are not face to face with a myth embedded in our culture but rather with a relentless fact: the fact that the deadly virus exists inescapably no matter in which corner of the world we are. Just as the

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<sup>1</sup> My elaboration on Nietzsche's understanding of ancient Greek culture in this section is based on my unpublished dissertation titled *The Relation between Metaphysics and Art in Nietzsche's Philosophy*. For an extended discussion of this topic please refer to Chapter 3 of the dissertation, "Meaninglessness as a Productive 'Problem'", particularly pp. 74-89 (Karahana Balya, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> References to *The Birth of Tragedy* are given in section numbers.

wisdom of Silenus, the pandemic bears the danger of instilling in our minds a negative attitude towards life or that of giving up on life. To put it in a nutshell, the words which Silenus regards as inconvenient for us to hear now press themselves ruthlessly on each and every one of us and in all aspects of our lives, shouting out that our existence is merely ephemeral, that we exist only momentarily on earth and our lives, even if it is short-lived, are inherently and meaninglessly bound with suffering, decay and destruction in an ineliminable manner.

From this point of view, and perhaps most importantly, the pandemic has disclosed to us our vulnerability and mortality. The trust in our existence as beings securely settled in the world, and even our existence as a species, has been undermined by this uncanny experience. Although the losses we have gone through due to the pandemic may show us how unjust the political and socio-economic order of the modern capitalist world is, at the same time it demonstrates the very disturbing truth that life is full of pain, suffering, injustice and cruelty. As Nietzsche tells us the myth, Silenus *warns* before speaking the ugly truth about human existence, but the pandemic has not given any warning in advance. Thus, to speak in Nietzschean terms, the “veil of illusion” that has been neatly placed by our sciences, technology, arts as well as religions over ugly truths of life has suddenly dropped with the outbreak of the pandemic (Nietzsche, 2000b: §5). Put in a nutshell, the pandemic proved to be an *unsettling* experience for human beings.

It is all these losses accompanied by a long-lasting fear of loss that reminds us of the fact that our endeavours are not only directed towards thriving and flourishing in life but also towards mere survival. I believe this idea takes us to Nietzsche’s famous concept of the will to power. Before taking a deeper look at this matter, let me note in passing that Nietzsche formulates the will to power as the most fundamental principle of life to which all living organisms including human beings are indispensably bound. I understand the will to power as the core concept in Nietzsche’s thought which gives an account of life’s dynamism: the dynamism of endless becoming, or rather overcoming and interplay of forces within life. Every living being is the product of the activity of certain forces, which are indispensably subject to the will to power. Moreover, rather than a metaphysical principle Nietzsche puts forward the will to power as the force of life that both destroys and creates, that both simplifies and proliferates at the same time. It is the source of seemingly opposite activities, indeed any activity that ever occurs in life. This aspect of the will to power is Nietzsche’s way of understanding it in terms of an economy, a key concept in grasping it, as I will try to clarify here. The word “economy” is rooted in the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is a combination of two words, namely *oikos* (house) and *nemein* (manage), and thus literally means “household management.” “Nietzsche regards life as an economy, because he thinks that it has its own mechanisms of management or perpetuation, comprising both creative and destructive aspects, perspectives of both preservation and enhancement, or both high and low points in terms of energy” (Karahan Balya, 2015: 37). We can also say that there is an inner logic to life which at times brings to the fore the perspective of preservation and at others that of enhancement or thriving.

### 3. Putting the Pandemic on a Scale

Now, let me reformulate the central question that I posed at the beginning of the article: If we take the inner logic of life to operate on a scale of preservation and enhancement, where would we locate different attitudes towards the Coronavirus pandemic on this scale? What roles do the perspectives of preservation or enhancement play in the emergence of our attitudes, if any? Or as Nathan Eckstrand rightly asks in his piece about the pandemic: “who are we now?” Am I the same person as I was before the pandemic? Do I wish to be that person again and go back to my life before the pandemic to safely hug a friend and enjoy a concert with the crowd? Or am I content or do I strive to adapt my ways of relating to the world (e.g. socializing) under the conditions of the pandemic? Do I embrace the change that is imposed upon my life? What is my desire and is it attainable? Does it help me move forward towards a different future – though uncertain it is – or cause me to get stuck in the past as the pandemic persists?

I want to answer these questions by reinterpreting the wisdom of Silenus with reference to the will to power, understood on the axis of Nietzsche’s differentiation between “not willing” and “willing nothingness”, which is an elaboration that is found in his later works and will be further discussed in this section.

I believe Nietzsche refers to the Silenus myth to present us with a hypothetical case comparing two possibilities. This is like a thought experiment. Firstly, there is the hypothetical option of not to have been born. In the context of the pandemic, our desire that the pandemic has never happened or that we have never gone through the pandemic corresponds to this option. Such a desire belongs to someone who sees living (thus, willing) as an overwhelming burden. Just as someone who sees the pandemic as nothing but a devastating burden. Thus, I propose that this first option corresponds to not willing. Just as not to be born and not willing is not an option for any living being, not having gone through the pandemic cannot be an option, either. One can only desire it, but can never do it.

Secondly, there is the option of dying soon, as Silenus speaks of. I argue that this refers to willing nothingness. This second option is a more complex one, so let me dwell on it further. In order to better understand the mechanism here I suggest that we look at Nietzsche’s critique of the ascetic ideal. As it is commonly known, Nietzsche’s overall philosophy is a severe critique of many forms and products of human civilization after the ancient Greeks (such as monotheistic religions and modern science), because Nietzsche thinks that they are all dominated by the same underlying system of values, that is, by the ascetic ideal: an ideal that is based on a view of life as essentially deficient just because life is prone to change, destruction and suffering. Based on this idea the ascetic ideal prescribes a denial of life:

... all that willing which has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself. (Nietzsche, 2000a: III, §28)<sup>3</sup>

In Nietzsche's view, insulting life because it is prone to change and suffering has lots of implications and leads one to adopt a certain way of thinking such as an absolutist understanding of truth, seeking the truth in and through reason, a hatred of the body, distrust in senses and feelings and many more. Such a manner of thinking, Nietzsche thinks, is hostile to life, as it does not embrace life in its fullness. Moreover, it is based on a dualistic understanding. Investing the value into one element of the duality, it thereby slanders the other element – just as it is the case in the famous body-mind dualism, which the Western metaphysical thought has long suffered from.

But can we say this way of thinking is also a denial of willing? Let us take as an example overvaluing the mind over the body and engaging in ascetic practices. Is the will denied in these practices? Do they aim at getting away from willing? I think Nietzsche's answer is "no". Nietzsche's point here is also that even in the context of the ascetic ideal one can still speak of willing *something*. This something, however, is nothingness. In other words, willing nothingness, or the ascetic ideal, is still a manifestation of the will. The rest of the above quote will make this point clearer:

– all this means – let us dare to grasp it – *a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life... but it is and remains a *will!* ... And, to repeat in conclusion what I said at the beginning: man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will. [Lieber will noch der Mensch *das Nichts* wollen, als *nicht* wollen...] (*ibid.*)

At this point let me repeat that Nietzsche differentiates between not willing and willing nothingness. The difference between the two is just like the difference between not to have been born and dying soon in the Silenus myth. The first one, namely not willing, is not a real option for any living being whereas the second one is. What is more, willing nothingness refers to adopting a certain perspective, the perspective of preservation. It thus refers to a certain set of values and results in cultivating a certain attitude, in our case vis-à-vis the pandemic. A basic characteristic of this attitude is the tendency to escape the challenge, which means getting out of the "problem" through the shortest route (often without really facing it) and legitimizing whatever serves that shortest route.

I think this second option corresponds exactly to some policy reactions during the outbreak of the pandemic. Let us remember the aggressive measures taken in Wuhan for instance, the first city to be completely shut down. Following the Wuhan case, people all over the globe had to go through long periods of isolation, lockdowns on enormous scales so as to cover whole cities or regions, prohibition of transportation and other harsh

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<sup>3</sup> References to *On the Genealogy of Morals* are given in book numbers followed by section numbers.

prevention measures. We can also think about the extreme hygiene measures we used to take domestically, sterilising each and every object that entered to our “safe” domestic zone from the “dangerous” outside world. These are the types of measures that I consider “shortest routes” that would take us out of the rapid spread of the pandemic. In other words, these are the type of actions taken during an emergency, and it was a situation of emergency indeed.

In addition, if we think on an individual level, the perspective of preservation resulted in an adaptation in our ways of thinking that was ever more characterized by dualities. I mean that many of us have naturally found themselves thinking dualistically mainly driven by the motivation for self-preservation. The “Chinese versus other nationalities” duality, for instance, became almost a standard way of categorizing international visitors in many countries. Later, dualities such as “disinfected versus contaminated” (surfaces, packages, etc.), “vaccinated versus not vaccinated” (people) and “outdoors versus indoors” (meetings) came to shape our view of everyday actions. What I argue is that all this dualistic way of thinking and harsh policy measures have emerged naturally out of the economy of the will to power, which brought to the fore the perspective of preservation particularly at the outbreak of the pandemic. As Nietzsche also points out, during those times when the will to power manifests itself as the drive for self-preservation rather than other drives, then investing in mechanisms such as precaution and defence becomes the greatest motivation in our lives, cultivating more and more dualistic ways of thinking.

My point here is not to underestimate the importance of the drive for self-preservation but I would rather like to draw attention to the fact that the prevalence of this drive beyond measure has its downsides too, in other words, there is a cost to it. As mentioned at the beginning, what we encountered during the pandemic is an unexpected suspension or even a loss of our organically developed relation to the world. Now, I believe, from a Nietzschean perspective, there is a danger here, a pessimistic danger, namely the danger of aversion to life, meaning that in the midst of such an extreme suspension and loss of values and practices, we are faced with the difficulty of replacing the old ones with new ones. Pressurized under the pandemic by the drive for self-preservation, we are prone to the risk of being paralyzed and getting stuck in a futile nostalgia, unable to utilize our potential for creating a novel future and instead yearning for the past, submitting to whatever limitations imposed by the pandemic. Speaking in Nietzschean terms, this means submitting to the perspective of preservation at the expense of losing the power and perspective of overcoming, which is nothing but losing our prospects for an enhanced future.

#### **4. Conclusion, or Affirmation as the Third Option**

In a famous aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes:

Physiologists should think twice before positioning the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to discharge

its strength – life itself is will to power –: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent consequences of this. (Nietzsche, 2002: §15)<sup>4</sup>

What I would like to argue at this point is that such an understanding of the will to power and self-preservation takes us to a third option, one which is not explicitly mentioned in the Silenus myth but is the one that Nietzsche devotes the whole *Birth of Tragedy*, as I understand it. This third option is affirmation of willing or affirmation of life in its wholeness and it is based on the perspective of enhancement as opposed to the perspective of preservation. In his analysis of ancient Greeks, Nietzsche refers to this attitude as the Greek insight that embraces the horrific aspects of existence instead of degrading and denying their value for life. Just as Fulden İbrahimhakkıoğlu rightly put in her opening speech during the SWIP-TR 4<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Women Philosophers, it is the same pandemic that put us all apart but at the same time brought us together today from different parts of the world, perhaps in a way that would not be possible unless we met online. And we appreciate that. We appreciate the opportunities of the pandemic or that willing which creates new opportunities even in times of the pandemic, which we could not even think of at the initial outbreak. This is, according to Nietzsche, the tragic meaning of suffering. A tragic outlook necessitates courage, just as the courage of Antigone, who pursues what she believes to be right and in this sense dares to create a new value at the cost of her own life.

The pandemic not only showed us our vulnerability and the “dismantling” of our daily practices and values. I think it also brought to the fore the fact that *we* have created all those practices and values, that *we* have given them their meanings:

We have created the world that possesses values! Knowing this, we know, too, that reverence for truth is already the consequence of an illusion—and that **one should** value more than truth the force that forms, simplifies, shapes, invents. (Nietzsche, 1967: §602)<sup>5</sup>

It is us who determine the meaning of friendship or home or safety. We are the ones that regard physical touch as an essential element of social interaction. But we are also the ones who have invented fist-bump so as to replace handshake or hugging. We are the ones who are compensating the loss of physical get-togethers by throwing virtual parties in their absence. I believe that it is invaluable to consider the pandemic as an opportunity and to acknowledge that life has terrible sides, which contributes to creating a transformative and creative capacity. Only based on such a perspective of enhancement can the will to power manifest itself in affirmative and inventive ways. Only with this outlook can we put an end to our yearning for the past and create a desirable post-pandemic life. I mean this both at an individual level and on a larger global scale: be it

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<sup>4</sup> References to *Beyond Good and Evil* are given in section numbers.

<sup>5</sup> References to *The Will to Power* are given in note numbers.



replacing the hug with fist bump or trying to alter the whole system of production, as expressed in Latour's call.

In this context, I believe that elaborating on the concept of the "new normal" bears great importance. The manner in which we are going to "normalize" as we start stepping out of the pandemic will depend on acknowledging that we have actually gone through the pandemic and also on the fact that we can draw from the lessons learnt from this experience. Therefore, I will conclude by discussing some of those "lessons" that the pandemic taught us. It should be noted that I do not present them in a naively optimistic sense and I am well aware that there have been brutal exploitations and great suffering during the pandemic. However, what I would like to point out in this last discussion is that the pandemic has also paved the way for nurturing more positive and productive practices as well as values in our social and economic life. I propose that these practices and values are what can lead us in our way towards "normalizing" in an affirmative and life-enhancing manner.

Perhaps one of the most pronounced positive pandemic practices is the new platforms and forms of solidarity that have emerged with(in) different groups such as the elderly and working parents, being some of the most vulnerable groups to be hit by the pandemic. Secondly, we have come to question the long-established practices and quality of education and learning including all study cycles from primary to higher education. Digitalisation and the so-called emergency remote teaching methods compelled educators and learners to adopt greater flexibility. Similarly, office hours have shifted and become more flexible to the advantage of employees in some cases and distance working practices have become more common. As another case, institutions, companies and even smaller communities such as project teams have learnt the benefits of virtual activities that contribute to avoiding the environmental costs that would otherwise be incurred by physical activities. Although we have suffered from the disadvantages of physically moving and coming together, we have also learnt to view things from the sustainability point of view and perhaps pondered on the carbon footprint of our actions to a greater extent.

Now, these are all daily practices and we wonder whether they will be abandoned or pursued once the pandemic is over. I think this question can be better answered if we consider that our actions are actually bearers of values and that daily practices and values change mutually and interdependently. So, the question of whether the support mechanisms created by a group of working parents will persist even after the pandemic can be answered by referring to values in action: is collectivism or individualism the higher value adopted by these people now? Similarly, changes in working environments will be adopted or abandoned on the basis of competing values: is it now profitability or employee welfare that is more highly valued? In production processes will companies prioritize environmentally responsible and sustainable actions more than they used to do? Lastly, on an individual level, which one is my priority: Having a weekend vacation on a remote part of the country or a regular family gathering?

Thanks to the pandemic, we have now developed some distance towards the old “normal”, including our old values, and at the same time we experienced new ones. I believe that this distance can function as a ground upon which we can act with a view of affirmation and enhancement. Now that it is time for the clash of the old and the new, we can be active agents in this process by pondering on the old and the new and actively utilizing our potential for transformation and creation. This very act itself will be our creative response to the question “who are we now?”

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