



Human Suffering as a Discursive Intersection

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The longstanding question over the human condition and the causes of our seemingly perpetual suffering is one that has plagued the minds of great philosophers. Two prominent ideologies arise from Achille Mbembe and Friedrich Nietzsche. The differences in their backgrounds must be noted; Nietzsche is a 19th century European thinker, while Mbembe is a modern Cameroonian theorist. Their contrasting geochronological identities has certainly influenced the way that both philosophers view the concept of human suffering. This leads into the question: In what ways does the concept of human suffering function as a discursive intersection of the dominant philosophies of Achille Mbembe and Friedrich Nietzsche?

Friedrich Nietzsche

To begin with Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, Bernard Reginster attempts to provide a thorough and systematic delineation over Nietzsche's arguments regarding the value of human existence with regards suffering. While Reginster contends that Nietzsche's ideas are systematic, he does not imply that Nietzsche strives to solve every philosophical topic. However, the assumption of systematicity is one element of Reginster's argument that is particularly problematic to some. Through this systematic approach, Nietzsche's views on metaethics and normative ethics can be organised around a single goal: conquering nihilism. Even sceptics have to admit that Reginster's approach is an original and provocative way to view Nietzsche's ethical beliefs. To this effect, Reginster begins by defining nihilism as the belief that life has no significance or that there are no worthy aims; it is simply a condition of pain. Following this, nihilism can take two forms: disorientation and despair. With this in mind, Reginster's approach of how Nietzsche attempts to overcome nihilism is likewise separated into two sections.

Reginster opens by addressing how to overcome nihilism in terms of the disorientation project. Disorientation is caused by anti-realism, which is the belief that there are no objective values. What this means is that general human existence has no purpose to the disorientated since there is nothing of actual value and thus nothing objectively worthwhile to accomplish. So in order to avoid disorientation, Reginster proposes what is known as a metaethical revaluation. Reginster proposes that this could take the shape of a subjectivist or a fictionalist approach. In regards to the former, subjectivism is founded on the assumption that our moral beliefs are only dependent on our feelings; essentially things are only worthwhile because individuals assign them value. So, subjectivist disorientation is avoided by rediscovering belief in individual values despite their lack of objectivity. To reject disorientation through a fictionalist approach is to believe that the moral statements we accept should be considered as expedient fictions. By fictionalist principles, disorientation is avoided by realising that values can guide our decisions based only on such principles alone, without the need for further objective support. Reginster

appears to favour the subjectivist position at times, but ultimately remains neutral on the subject; he does not feel Nietzsche must absolutely fit into one of the camps.

The second step in overcoming nihilism is overcoming despair, which is the feeling that what we most want is unattainable. This project necessitates substantive reevaluation, which is only first order compared to the disorientation project. The two projects are both important aspects of Nietzsche's approach to overcome nihilism. Because both projects are important in the reevaluation of our understanding, nihilism cannot be overcome by either project alone. However, the disorientation project must be completed first, because the despair project must take place within the confines of proper metaethical views, which only exists after the disorientation project has been completed.

Reginster then segues into focusing on the role of suffering in mankind. Nietzsche maintains that the will to power craves unmet needs and suffering, to which refers to opposition in the pursuit of a goal. An issue arises from Reginster's argument, which is that while Nietzsche does argue that suffering is valuable, Nietzsche has an important limitation which is that individuals can only endure suffering when we find it meaningful, which Reginster fails to properly address. Reginster's explanation of Nietzsche's philosophy in connection with Schopenhauer's merely adds to this. Because of the nature of the will, Schopenhauer argued that happiness, when interpreted hedonistically, is unattainable. According to Schopenhauer, we only move between boredom and suffering, with suffering generated by unmet wants and boredom created by the will to live unsatisfied. Compared to Nietzsche's solution to suffering, Schopenhauer's is far more straight-forward; Schopenhauer's solution is to give up all desire and will to live. This allows mankind to reach some serenity (relief from pain), but it makes happiness (pleasure offered by satisfying our needs) difficult to accomplish. Reginster believes that Nietzsche responds to Schopenhauer's "will to live" by substituting it for a want of power. According to Schopenhauer's perspective, there is an inherent conflict in our will that prevents us from realising happiness, which is frequently the ultimate objective that humanity aspires for. This struggle, according to Reginster, will not go away; there is an underlying fight inside human will that forbids anything more than the ephemeral gratification of the desire to power, since its fulfilment causes its own unhappiness.

Maudemarie Clark a sceptic in regards to the systematicity of Reginster's approach to Nietzsche's work and, she, above all, rejects Reginster's contention that nihilism is a result of the avoidance and denunciation of suffering, which is a central argument in Reginster's line of reasoning. Clark begins having issues with Reginster due to his treatment of suffering as the key to Nietzsche's account of the life-negating values that have led to nihilism. According to Reginster's account of Nietzsche, he is condemning suffering, which means he believes that suffering should not exist. According to Reginster, Nietzsche suggests that we fundamentally desire power, and if power requires us to overcome resistance, then we will endure suffering to gain this power. This is an idea Nietzsche has that was influenced by Schopenhauer, who stated that suffering is just the experience of opposition to our will. Therefore, Clark concludes that

circumventing suffering is out of our control and that suffering is necessary, whereas Reginster believes that not only can we avoid suffering, but we should.

Achille Mbembe

Mbembe's perspective on suffering, on the other hand, differs. Although Mbembe's text is similarly driven by the death-drive of suffering, complicity, and perversion, Jeremy Weate believes it is due to his unintentional rejection of the creative matrix. Mbembe, as a masculinist thinker, is prone to unintentionally interpreting any relationship between creativity and the maternal or feminine. Weate contemplates on what this signifies for Mbembe's perspective on suffering. Mbembe is a postcolonial writer who is intimately engaged with Christianity, and Vincent Lloyd begins to respond to this. Lloyd investigates the function of Christianity in regards to postcolonial, and specifically African, contexts. He concludes that one function of Christianity was preserving Europe's self-image, which caused suffering. But it also helped in creating a structure for postcolonial resistance, which can be associated with resentment. It must be noted that while Mbembe's ideas on black theology are promising, he has significant limitations due to his underlying secularist assumptions.

One of the most defining productions of Mbembe was his in depth exploration of the term "necropolitics" in his book of the same name. For him, necropolitics represents the politics of "selective elimination," the rejection of various blocs deemed resistive or unnecessary by the state; there is also the term biopolitics, which "aims to control and govern the masses or better the dynamic expanse of life" (Das). This idea of necropolitics is significant in his understanding of human suffering because it is a lens that he uses to analyse many real-world examples; he mainly uses it to make the point that governments become necropolitical when "they spearhead war against other nations in order to sustain forms of global apartheid" (Das). Mbembe uses the examples of the "Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Gulf War, the American War of Secession, the Crimean War, and the decolonization of Indochina, Algeria, and Angola & Mozambique" in order to prove idea (Das). Mbembe's perspective of suffering relies primarily upon his black experience, notably their enslavement. Mbembe interacts with the slave trade in *Necropolitics* solely to make black people iconic and constituents of a history that unfolds with and maximizes the possibilities of the future. This establishes a novel sort of ethics, which links with the African past rather than being something dead or gone, instead as emblematic of 'a living labour' for creating the new Earth. This link is based on the hardship that black slaves endured and their ability to persist; Gerber's interpretation of *Critique of Black Reason* emphasises this relationship even further.

Much like in *Necropolitics*, *Critique of Black Reason* begins by examining the link between capitalism and slavery. Mbembe describes the horror that black slaves went through and how it was justified by European ideas of racial superiority (Gerber 166). From here Mbembe looks at how the black man had to reconstruct himself due to the pain of slavery. In chapter 5, what Mbembe calls the foundation of the book, Mbembe analyses the

phenomenology of what it took to survive under the conditions of slavery, or what he describes as a requiem for a slave. He explores qualities, like the human capacity for metamorphosis, that were needed in order to survive and keep oneself human in the face of total dehumanising practices (Gerber 167). Essentially Mbembe describes how to keep oneself sane in the face of suffering, and how this can cause one to come back even stronger. Building off Gerber's analysis, Mbembe ties this in with the Christian idea of the triple pattern of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, how sacrifice leads to salvation. Christ's horrific death and subsequent resurrection demonstrate the total distinctness of a human metamorphosis, one in that the Black race is called to take part. In order to reach true understanding, suffering is required to cause the pain in which wisdom grows from.

Herein lies a potential difference between Mbembe and Nietzsche, while they both agree that suffering is necessary to an extent, their reasoning is slightly different. Mbembe, who in part differs because of his religious backing, believes that suffering is required to transform and reach a new understanding. Whereas, Nietzsche sees suffering as necessary to the will to power, meaning as a main driving force in humans. More significantly is the question over whether Nietzsche believes that one should avoid suffering, whereas Mbembe believes that one must embrace suffering.

Gap

I am operating within a gap of understanding because there is not much analysis done into the intersection of these two philosophers. The only paper that I found that really compares Nietzsche and Mbembe is a paper by Veeran Naicker which deals with how Mbembe was influenced by Nietzsche's concept of resentment. Resentment is essentially the "charged desire for revenge that involves the belief that someone or other is responsible for the suffering." Naicker is simply looking at how each reacts to resentment, which is not the full scope of either philosopher's discourse on suffering. It merely looks at how suffering can cause an uprising: Nietzsche looking at nobility and the Jewish, and Mbembe looking at slave revolts. Additionally, Naicker looks at more than just Nietzsche and Mbembe, so his content is diluted by the beliefs of other philosophers.

Methods

My project aims to look at the discursive intersection of two philosophers' beliefs on suffering. This is highly dependent on the understanding that I am able to achieve through interpretation. Therefore, my method is highly rooted in hermeneutics, which is the study of interpretation. "Hermeneutics plays a role in a number of disciplines whose subject matter demands interpretative approaches, characteristically, because the disciplinary subject matter concerns the meaning of human intentions, beliefs, and actions, or the meaning of human experience as it is preserved in the arts and literature, historical testimony, and other artefacts" (George). As such, this makes it not only historically the most used way to conduct philosophy research, but also the most logically sound due to the fact philosophical research relates heavily

in interpreting texts and synthesising concepts. Of course other means of philosophical research was considered, the other primary method considered was experimental philosophy. This led to a combination of hermeneutics and experimental philosophy being chosen. “Experimental philosophy is an interdisciplinary approach that brings together ideas from what had previously been regarded as distinct fields” (Knobe). Specifically, this means using empirical data to inform research on philosophical questions.

A general outline of this combination method, which will be described in further detail later on, is as follows: 1) define research limits, 2) pick the philosophers and their texts, 3) read the texts once to familiarise oneself with the concepts being presented, 4) identify the philosopher’s general views in each text and find potential connections, 5) find specific evidence to backs up conclusions, and finally, 6) offer critiques, synthesise concepts, and bring research into broader context. This method has been developed through combining the general philosophy paper guidelines proposed by Oxford University, Harvard University, and Stanford University, as well as the concepts proposed in hermeneutics and experimental philosophy. Defining research limits is the most important step in the entire research process. Creating an understanding of what one hopes to get out of their research informs every decision made thereafter. I began with the overall question of “what do philosophers say about suffering?” I began by hoping to learn about how suffering connects to the general human experience, however, after conducting more preliminary research, it became abundantly clear that I wanted to learn more specifically what purpose suffering had. The decision over what research limits to have is a personal one and depends on each researcher, due to this individuality the process is replicable and can be tailored as such.

The second step was to choose the philosopher and their texts. To begin this process a list was created that contained a relatively exhaustive list of all philosophers that discussed suffering. In order to narrow down the list, brief readings of each philosopher and the academic literature surrounding each philosopher was conducted. From here, in order to choose which philosophers my research would cover, the two philosophers that were chosen should have contrasting backgrounds and thought processes while staying within the realms of my research guidelines as stated above. Choosing the texts were much simpler than the philosophers because a philosopher only has a quantifiable number of books and from there determining whether suffering was discussed simply took a search and glance over the text. From there, it was easy to find the primary texts that each philosopher had regarding suffering.

The third and fourth steps involve a general read over the texts, looking for ideas on suffering that popped out, this is known as a general preliminary, this is where the meat of explicating the texts begins. Most important is remembering what the guiding question is (Burch); in this case the guiding question is my research pertaining to suffering, and more specifically how two philosophers’ views differ. Next, consider how the philosopher’s reasoning logically progresses, this does not mean chronologically, but focusing on how the ideas flow together (Rippon). This ultimately leads to a comprehensive understanding over what each philosophers’ lines of reasoning are. At this point, a brief summary should be written that follows

each philosophers' lines of reasoning that focuses on the development and totality of each of their arguments.

The fifth step is identifying empirical evidence that backs up the summaries. Direct quotations are necessities for philosophy papers, and summaries should never replace what the philosopher is actually saying. This is especially true when the precise way the philosopher has chosen to express something figures essentially into your analysis, specifically any vocabulary. Often, much of the sense of a text lies hidden in the way that its reasoning unfolds (Rippon). So being able to cut through unnecessary details and identify arguments embedded in discourse is unavoidable.

The final step is the most important; looking for connections within texts of one philosopher and between Mbembe and Nietzsche as well. In the end, I will try to come to some overall conclusion or assessment of the texts being considered. This is where much of the hard work puzzling elements and evidence from each of the philosophers will take place; looking at seeing how the different pieces connect. To this end, hopefully a logical line of reasoning that sees the works of each philosopher working together and their contrasting elements will arise when a conclusion can ultimately be reached. There is an additional component to this step that involves critique. There are many ways that this can take form. Firstly this can mean looking for fallacies or inconsistencies that cannot be resolved; paradoxes that arise due to a philosopher's belief system. To this end, identify important considerations that the philosopher has failed to make, which tends to undermine the conclusion. However, in the spirit of interpretive charity, it is important to note that these philosophers and their have been analysed by a lot of people, so the chances that they have not been caught is low. Secondly, this can mean strengthening the philosopher's position by showing how these criticisms can actually be met.

Choosing the Philosophers and Texts

To address the first criteria of having contrasting backgrounds, Achille Mbembe and Friedrich Nietzsche very much fulfil such criteria. As has already been established: Nietzsche is a 19th century European thinker, while Mbembe is a modern Cameroonian theorist, therefore their severely contrasting geochronological identities caused them to have the potential to develop extremely different beliefs on suffering. The other philosophers were considered such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Elaine Scarry, Terry Eagleton, and Arthur Frank. From reading about Schopenhauer, it became clear that he was the inspiration for many of the concepts that Nietzsche would go on to discuss. However, Nietzsche was chosen over Schopenhauer because he offered a more nuanced perspective, offering rebuttals. Scarry was not chosen because she looked into physical pain specifically and not psychological as much, her opinions on inflicting pain as a mode of gaining illegitimate power while interesting, do not ultimately fit within my research guidelines. Eagleton likewise did not fit within my research limits, as he focused more on the differences between sacrifice and suffering, focusing on how sacrifice is suffering that one chooses to go through. Frank eventually proved to not fit within my research limits as well because he focused on suffering in the context of medicine. All of the preliminary

research proved to be helpful in interpreting the chosen philosophers and texts because the academic literature and brief readings provided great background knowledge.

After the philosophers were selected, picking which texts were to be studied was straight-forward. After conducting research, it became abundantly clear that Mbembe and Nietzsche each had two texts that largely focused on the concepts of human suffering. Mbembe had *Necropolitics* and *Critique of Black Reason*. Nietzsche had *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *The Will to Power*. Each author had more tangentially related texts, however, for the context of this research and the timeline constraints, my research was conducted with these two books in mind.

General Arguments

After completing steps three and four, the following conclusions were reached over each philosophers' lines of reasoning. Nietzsche opens *The Will to Power* by stating that the world is full of suffering and that it lacks any overall purpose or meaning. From here, he begins to develop the argument that while suffering lacks meaning, the ability to deal with suffering and overcome them, is a valuable exercise of power and character. Essentially such that suffering serves as a driving force, a mechanism that acts as a motivation of self-improvement. This argument extends in *The Genealogy of Morals*, where he argues that humans create their own meaning in life by setting goals and striving for excellence. Therefore, when individuals are faced with suffering, if they are strong enough to look past the pain, they can find value in it. Nietzsche's argument is grounded in historic examples, on the other hand, Mbembe's identity as a postcolonial philosopher is grounded in real world examples of colonisation, slavery, and racial segregation.

Much of Mbembe's argument is based on how the Black Man was viewed as an exploitable object, a symbol of a person at the mercy of the whip and suffering in a field of struggle that divides socially and racially divided groups and factions against one another (Mbembe, *The Critique of Black Reason* 37). But eventually, the Black Man reached the point where they began to fight for their right to be freed from the bonds of labour. That is to mean that suffering often causes the spirit of rebellion through generating unconscious and conscious thoughts of the need to be free of suffering. This ties in with the Christian idea of the triple pattern of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, how sacrifice leads to salvation (Mbembe 194). Basically Mbembe looks at suffering to be a form of metamorphosis, looking at how the action of suffering itself is beneficial.

Comparison

In both books, but specifically *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche simply describes suffering as an element that is present in the human experience. He is famously misinterpreted as saying "to live is to suffer," however, the most similar quote to the misquotation is "man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer." He is essentially of the belief that suffering is an effect of being alive; that everyone suffers and that it is the human condition. While Mbembe would

agree on this note, his belief over the causes of suffering is slightly more nuanced. Due to his focus on colonisation, Mbembe's beliefs over the cause of suffering is more involved with the idea that other humans are the cause of suffering, rather than simply the environment. In Mbembe's book *Necropolitics*, he delves into "the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjugated to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living-dead." Which essentially describes how groups of humans are enslaved by others, which in turn causes suffering; essentially he explores the concepts of how certain groups inflict suffering on others. While Nietzsche and Mbembe's lines of reasoning are not necessarily in conflict, there exists a certain tension because Mbembe's argument centres around how other humans inflict suffering rather than it simply just an omnipresent force.

Much of Mbembe's argument stems from his identity as a Catholic. A central argument made in his line of reasoning is that suffering is important to create a "triple pattern of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection—of sacrifice and salvation" (Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*). What Mbembe is essentially saying is that the process of suffering forces humans to undergo a metamorphosis to shift and adjust due to the pain. He connects this to how Christ had to be crucified in order to reach a higher understanding and be resurrected. In contrast, Nietzsche is a staunch atheist, having written a book titled *God is Dead*, in which he described how "God" was a figment created by humans, and because of modern philosophers and thinkers, "God's" purpose had been destroyed and therefore was not needed anymore. So although Mbembe's conclusions do largely rely on a religious example, Nietzsche's conclusions do not preclude the involvement of religion as a means of instruction; which is to mean that while religion is a means to an end, Nietzsche could appreciate the benefit over the use of a communally understood message.

Both philosophers had opposing views on the use of resentment in the context of Naicker's paper. In philosophy and psychology, resentment is one of the forms of resentment or hostility (Naicker). In fact the concept was particularly developed by Nietzsche and he heavily influenced future use of the term. Frantz Fanon is the first postcolonial philosopher to use resentment, however, he inaccurately interpreted Nietzsche. This incorrect interpretation was subsequently used by Edward Said and Achille Mbembe. When resentment travelled to postcolonial philosophy, Nietzsche's insights were discarded, and the term changed to Hegelian and psychoanalytic schematics. The issue with this is that it considers morality to be universal and prescriptive, which was the exact issue that Nietzsche was attempting to address (*On the Genealogy of Morality*). However, while the two philosophers' views on resentment are widely different, these views do not influence the philosophers' overall arguments over suffering. Resentment is merely a facet that exists within each argument that does not have any real influence on their real arguments.

The most significant difference between the two philosophers are their views over the purpose of suffering. Not only is this where one of the most marked differences in their philosophies exist, it is also the most significant difference to each philosophers' arguments. Each philosopher is attempting to build their lines of reasoning to reach a conclusion over the

purpose and importance of suffering, that is what their arguments hinge on. Nietzsche concludes that suffering must exist, because it serves as a driving force; he believes that all great men have gone through suffering and attempting to avoid it causes them to reach new heights. Mbembe believes that the process of suffering is one of metamorphosis and creates meaningful change. Essentially, while both philosophers agree on its importance, they disagree on the exact function it has.

New Understanding

Human suffering functions as a discursive intersection of the dominant philosophies of Achille Mbembe and Friedrich Nietzsche under the areas of the causes of suffering, the relationship religion has with suffering, how the concept of suffering relates with resentment, and the purpose of suffering. Most significant is the way each philosopher views the purpose of suffering, as it is central to their fundamental thesis. While Nietzsche sees suffering as a driving force, arguing that people are driven to become stronger and more powerful in order to overcome their challenges. Whereas Mbembe bestows value onto the process of suffering itself. He views suffering as metamorphosis in which humans must transform in order to adapt to the challenges they face. Most significantly, it should be highlighted that both philosophers derive meaning from suffering, whether this comes from the growth before or after suffering, this speaks to the importance that suffering holds in human experience; for two philosophers across centuries, that went through wildly different life experiences, to view suffering as a paramount element to human life is substantial evidence to its importance.

Critiques and Implications

An inherent implication to all hermeneutics methods is the element of interpretation. Because every person will interpret a text differently, the conclusions they reach using a hermeneutics method will likewise be different. While forcing the use of quotation takes away some of the potential biases that may exist, however it is not 100% foolproof.

Although this remains to be a relatively comprehensive analysis over each philosophers' beliefs over suffering, it is not a complete analysis. Due to the time constraints, it is not as if every text produced by each author could have been scoured to look for a mention of suffering. So therefore, certain elements of each philosophers' arguments could have been missed since not every single piece of each philosophers' work was analysed.

Due to the replicability of the method, this method could be used for different philosophers and texts; it could even be used for a different philosophical topic. In regards to the former, this is associated with step 2, simply substitute any two different philosophers or authors and their subsequent texts. As for the latter, this is associated with step 1, the topic should have rigid research limits and from there the method is simply replicated.

Although philosophy seems to be an abstract discipline of study, it has wide-spread implications for the way we view and interact with the world. In the context of this experience understanding the necessity and the benefits of suffering can make it such that pain is more tolerable.



Whichever philosophers' view is taken, there will be some good associated with suffering and one will eventually reap the long-term benefits of short-term pain. However, knowing that there is some good at the end of all the suffering can make it so that the suffering is more tolerable and help one understand why suffering is essential; it can serve as a source of comfort.

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