

# nietzsche's tragic vision

**Jeffrey L. Bartilet**

Polytechnic University of the Philippines

## **Abstract**

The present paper seeks to explore Friedrich Nietzsche's notions of body-self and tragic vision. The writer then attempts to consider Nietzsche's account of the individual as a body-self and the tragic vision as a mode of experiencing life, human beings, and nature.

## **Keywords**

Friedrich Nietzsche, body-self, tragic vision, down-going



## Introduction

Pertinent questions regarding as to what extent should human beings consume natural resources and his or her role in the preservation of nature takes on an ever greater relevance as the global phenomenon of climate change, the experience of food production shortages in some parts of the world, the rise of diseases caused by human experimentation in the name of technological advancements and outbreaks born out of the abnormal change of seasons continues to plague humanity. Add to this is the impact of globalization and capitalists expansion penetrating practices and ways of life that is grounded on balance and ecological sustainability. These predicaments, no doubt, threaten not only human life but all life forms in the planet as well. But another problem which adds to this situation is how most individuals perceive and talk about the environment as if the environment is separated from human beings, as if it is a mere concept confined to human abstraction separated from his or her actual life.

While the former is commonly discussed in the field of environmental ethics<sup>1</sup> and ecology, the latter conception of the environment have become a dominant underlying presupposition among disciplines which have ineluctably led to a perception of nature as isolated from human existence. Perhaps a new way countering prevalent presupposition requires, as an entry point, a different mode of perceiving nature.

The environment or nature, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the place we live, work, study, and our very own selves, as we know it, is always experienced in an *immediate presence*. It is not severed from the actual life of individuals, societies or communities and as such, problems in the environment, natural or induced by human beings, affect us directly and instantaneously. Ecological disasters and environmental degradation affect us individually (e.g. when our health and well-being becomes an issue), socially (e.g. when it becomes a threat to the community it therefore requires planning to intervene and legislation to prevent, implement, and allocate resources for rehabilitation and preservation) and culturally (e.g. a society which is not consciously concerned with the environment would eventually consume or waste natural resources and destroy natural habitats eventually affecting ways of life and inherited traditions, beliefs and cultural practices that is grounded on the natural dwelling. Add to this is the exacerbating problem of poverty that affects communities ravaged by environmental destruction and overconsumption. A human society or community

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental ethics "is concerned with the moral relations that hold between humans and the natural world. The ethical principles governing those relations determine our duties, obligations, and responsibilities with regard to the Earth's natural environment and all animals and plants that inhabit it." Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

struggling for survival will be most likely be least concerned with the extinction of certain species of flora or fauna.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher who perceived a great change that took place in Europe during his time. He saw degeneration and degradation of European values, morality and culture. The degeneration of morality, values and culture which he speaks of have culminated in to what he calls "nihilism."<sup>2</sup> This nihilism, which is manifest in science, art, morality and philosophy, has eventually created life-denying values that tend to demean human life and this very world.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he made it his life-long commitment to militate against these life-denying values and to transvaluate them by creating and exhorting others to fashion new values so that human beings may thrive in society as creative and free individuals. Struggling with illness for the most part of his life, he traveled in some parts of Europe (particularly in Italy and Sweden) trying to find apt environments where his physical, cultural and intellectual health would prosper. The result of such travels were volumes of thought provoking insights crafted in unconventional styles using aphorisms, parables, stories and poetry.

Some dominant themes explored by Nietzsche are morality, art, history and politics. Although Nietzsche's text would seem to suggest that he gives no place in his writings on the value of nature, more so an elaborate discussion on the environment, our reading would try to show that Nietzsche's concern for life have also brought forth considerations which place paramount importance to the environment as the very ground which sustains life. In the following sections we shall be articulating three themes in his writings that explore this possibility.

## Tragic Vision

Nietzsche underscored the significance of tragedy in the life of the ancient Greeks. In fact, for him tragedy as an art form is a constant reminder to the Greeks of the fundamental condition of the human lot, the transitoriness of existence. It reveals that nothingness or annihilation is imminent which may come anytime and that the human

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<sup>2</sup> "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach an end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 455.

being is powerless against this act of *moira* [fate]. However, this feeling of suffering and despair is overcome by the very element in tragedy that is uniquely experienced in this performative art, that is, the experience of the *sublime*. To behold the tragic, to experience the transitoriness and uncertainty of existence brings upon us pathos, for "such everlasting and exclusive becoming, such injection of indetermination into the very core of things, is 'a fearful and paralyzing thought,' virtually a return to the terrible wisdom of Silenus. The greatest power is required to transform this thought again – as tragedy thus – 'into the opposite, into the sublime and into blessed astonishment'."<sup>4</sup> Tragedy then as an art allows us to experience pathos. And yet this pathos is transfigured into a higher, more existentially valuable plane, the experience of the sublime.

To experience the tragic in tragedy may also evoke upon us the antinomy of passivity and activity. On one level this experience of pathos may lead one to despair and resignation, a tendency to turn away from life and long for another realm or another world where there is bliss and absence of pain. On another level, because of tragedy's peculiar mode of art which allows us to experience and transcend suffering and pain by transfiguring it into the sublime, it becomes a catalyst within, a pervasive force which existentially ignites us to look at life in a different way. This different way of viewing the world allows us to judiciously think the way we do things to ourselves, to others, and to those things that surrounds us. And because we have realized the immanent fact of annihilation and the power of forces that are beyond our control it provides us with a room for mitigation. The tragic then has a twofold function: it in itself furnishes us to overcome despair, experience the fragility of our condition and affirm it as part of existence; at the same time it is the means by which how we go about in deciding things regarding our life.

One may begin to ask as to how the viewing of a performative art such as tragedy, performed in an open-air semicircular theater, influence Greek ordinary political and cultural life when in fact one can clearly perceive the radical difference between a drama, an imaginative artistic work, and that of ordinary everyday life is far too great. We may reply that in tragedy we behold the element that all mortals have in common, and that is the experience of the transitoriness of existence, of imminent annihilation. The saving grace of art comes in to redeem man from this state of anxiety. This curative role of art is not an anesthesia which numbs the core of our existence when we behold the tragic. Rather, "art approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform these horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live. These are the representation of the *sublime* as the artistic conquest of the awful, and the *comic* as the artistic release from the nausea of

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<sup>4</sup> John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 106.

the absurd."<sup>5</sup> The experience of pain and joy as it is revealed in tragedy brings upon oneself a different seeing, a different viewing of the world. The world becomes different in the sense that one is reminded of the fragility of our existence. This reminder and realization is the saving and transformative power of tragedy that deeply impresses upon those who behold the tragic. As the individual turns again to his or her everyday affairs this realization is then transported to ordinary life. Upon experiencing the tragic and the sublime life ceases to be ordinary. One becomes more cautious regarding things and thinks through situations and affairs more judiciously.

The tragic as the sublime was, according to Nietzsche, the secret ingredient of the Greeks for having a healthy life and culture. This reverberated in all their institutions to the extent that it created an atmosphere fertile for all political and creative endeavors.<sup>6</sup> It provided them conditions for flourishing in all areas of life and culture, enriching individuals within their society and, perhaps we could extend, to the historical period in which this thriving flows, a community fertile for the attainment of *eudaimonia* [well-being].

However, with the birth of the scientific spirit, which according to Nietzsche finds its inception in Socrates, the gradual decline of the tragic vision and eventual death of tragedy among the ancient Greeks began to infect art, morality, "science" and philosophy. This phenomenon according to Nietzsche reverberates to our time with what he calls as "nihilism." One product of nihilism is the unbridled confidence in reason and calculative thinking. This hubris thrives on the folly "that it can correct the world by knowledge, guide life by science, and actually confine the individual within, a limited solvable problems."<sup>7</sup> This total and secured belief<sup>8</sup> have consequently lead to view life and nature in terms of utility, as mere "objects" of the sciences (e.g. in medical, economic, or business parlance as mere "organs" or "patients," or "goods," "capital" or "surplus").

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* trans. by C. Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps one may look at the leap in artistic and political creativity before and during the time of Pericles to see this development.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> "[That] with the clue of logic, thinking can reach the nethermost depths of being, and that thinking can not only perceive being but modify it." *Ibid.*, 53.

## Body-self

The privileging of reason over other faculties was later taken on by the philosophical and theological successors of Socrates. They made theological and philosophical formulations that basically express that the "mind" is severed from the body and gave the former privilege over the latter. The "mind" as soul or reason is the sole measure of being human. To be human, according to this view, is to be rational. Other humanly attributes, such as passions or desires, is part of his animality and is therefore considered debased. Passion, instinct and desire therefore should be governed by reason and must always be kept in check.

In this privileging of the mind, soul or reason over the body, passions, instinct and desire there results a certain abhorrence to the body and to life. This abhorrence manifests itself in the culture, values, practices, beliefs and ways of life of people. Some forms of ascetic practices such as flagellations to the body and the meditative exercise which cultivate a yearning for another world found in another realm are only few of these expressions. This hatred for the body also ensue hatred for life as well. This abhorrence towards life and towards the body extends to a disregard for one's own health, and to an indifference to other individuals and to the environment. The view which holds that "the body is the prison house of the soul" also encapsulates this revulsive notion. This view, however, was emphatically criticized by Nietzsche. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he personified these class of men who represents this view as "the afterworldsmen." These men, who wanted the body lean, monstrous and famished, are preachers of death who declares that "life is only suffering . . . so see to it that you cease to live! So see to it that the life which is only suffering ceases."<sup>9</sup> He calls them the blasphemers of the earth for they "actively cultivate hatred of all things earthly – for body, sexuality, and art, the senses, instinct and desire."<sup>10</sup>

As a mode of countering this pervasive view which devalues life and this very world Nietzsche offers a physiological explanation of what to him is the real fact about ourselves and our bodies.

What the sense feels, what the spirit perceives, is never an end in itself. But sense and spirit would like to persuade you that they are the end of all things. . . . Sense and spirit are instruments and toys: behind them still lies the Self. The Self seeks with eyes of the sense, it listens too with the ears of the spirit. . . . The Self is always listening and seeking: it compares, subdues, conquers and destroys. It rules and is also the Ego's ruler. . . . Behind your thoughts and feelings my brother stands the mighty commander, an unknown sage – he is called the Self.

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* trans. R. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Kimerer Lamothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 61.

He lives in your body. *He is your body.* . . . There is more reason in your body than your best wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

For Nietzsche there is no "I" that is separated from the body. The Self is the body and the body is the Self. There is no segregation and separation. Our being is always of wholeness and becoming. And if *mind* is intricately knotted with the body then its major function, which is our rational and calculative faculty, is only one among the many physiological processes of our body. We say then that knowledge is not the mere product of the mind or reason. Rather, it is a mixture of many bodily processes which may include desires, passions and instinct.<sup>12</sup> One manner by which we experience bodily becoming is when certain situations confronts us or unfolds upon us which necessitate creativity. Our calculative and rational faculties and inner feelings are stirred up to act and create. The poet, for example, does not merely put and tie together words to form a poem. It comes out of life, in his or her life. What he experience becomes part of his bodily becoming. The poet, as Gwendolyn Brooks says, is one who distills experience, strains experience, and then works on it carefully, choosing, for him, the appropriate terms of expression as it bursts forth, taming, as it were, the overflow of life in him, which then results into his handiwork, the poem.

The severing of the mind from the body and the privileging of reason over other bodily functions and faculties turns us away from the true constitution of ourselves. It berates our faculties and capacities to experience the world and others beings and inhibits our potential as creative, free and responsive individuals. It consigns us to calculation, to concepts and terms confined to abstraction, to prefigured ways of living that suites the present day deluge of commercialization, which influence individuals and communities. It inhibits us to experience our bodies as ourselves, to learn other ways of knowing through our bodies. If we are truly body-selves, then "we must lead . . . the flown away virtue back to the earth... back to bodily life: [so that we] may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 62; emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> "After having looked long enough between the philosopher's lines and fingers, I say to my self: by far the greater part of conscious thinking must still be included among instinctive activities, and that goes even for philosophical thinking. We have to relearn here, as one has had to relearn about heredity and what is "innate." As the act of birth deserves no consideration in the whole process and procedure of heredity, so 'being conscious' is not a in any decisive sense the *opposite* of what is instinctive: most of the conscious thinking of a philosopher is secretly guided and forced into certain channels by his instinct." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. with commentary by W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books 1989), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 439.

**Down-going<sup>14</sup>**

The human being is at the crossroad,<sup>15</sup> either to act and to define his role in the very issue that confronts him (and this includes how he deals with his self and his environment) or to let forces which denies life and demean ourselves and nature prevail. If the way of life that we have inherited and the views and belief that we hold dear have prevented us to perceive and deal with ourselves as what we really are and if it turns us away from our role to take over and assume responsibility for ourselves and the environment then it is imperative that we relearn how to deal with nature and try to find ourselves.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Nietzsche we need to transvaluate the values that we hold dear, shatter the idols that have conjured in history that impedes us to perceive the fragility of our existence and our connection with nature. The transition from the old to the new requires a radical change in perception and conception of our selves and of the world. This requires action. The ideas that we currently operate upon and what we accept now to be the convenient way out may not be the solution. It is a difficult task, one that cannot be done in isolation. But another important question that may be posed is this: is humanity ready for this transition, is he prepared for this down-going?

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<sup>14</sup> R.J. Hollingdale, one of the many reliable translators of Nietzsche's works into English, in an endnote in his translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provides us with very important nuances contained in the German word *Untergehen*, translated as *down-going* in English. He says that "*Untergehen* has three meanings: to descend or to go down; to set (as the sun); and to be destroyed or go under. There is much play upon this triple meaning throughout the book." See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 339. *Down-going*, then, means several things; to plunge, to take a dive, to go under, and to bear what is brought forth in the going under, to descend and be open as to what strikes one upon the descent and impress it upon oneself, taking heed of it as one gropes his way through this descent; to set, to be temporarily out of sight or range of another's sensorial vision, knowing that this momentary "disappearance" is short lived, that to go unseen from one's vantage point does not necessarily mean that something has ceased to be, rather, despite this short lived "hiddenness" one continues to be in action, working, as it were, and that this transient condition leads to another ascent; to be destroyed, to affirm the inevitability of annihilation and to impress upon oneself that destruction is the precondition of renewal, that it is also an announcement of rebirth.

<sup>15</sup> "Now I bid you to . . . find yourselves . . . this is the great noontide: when man stands at the middle of his course . . . and celebrates his journey to the evening of his highest hope: for it is the journey to the new morning. . . . Then man going under will bless himself" (ibid., 104).

<sup>16</sup> "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves . . . we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves." Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 451.



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