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Horror

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Chapter One

Horror

Nietzsche's stature as a philosopher has risen dramatically since his death. His writings increasingly captivate philosophical readers. There are many reasons for this. One reason is the depth of his thought. Philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, or Hegel impress us with the scope and breadth of their thinking. Philosophers like Plato, Descartes, or Berkeley impress us with an original insight that they unfold and elaborate. Nietzsche is different. He thinks deeply. He digs beneath other philosophies. He forces us to look at traditional philosophical assumptions from a different angle. He undermines and subverts them. He opens up the possibility of thinking in radically new ways.

This fascinates us even if we worry about the consequences. We may have believed in those traditional philosophical perspectives. We may regret their collapse. We may wish they could have been defended. But Nietzsche forces us to see them from a new perspective such that it becomes very difficult to return to our old way of understanding things. Nietzsche's depth, his ability to subvert, enchants us even if we rue the consequences.

The first seven chapters of this book attempt to illuminate the depth of Nietzsche's thinking—indeed, to show that it is even more subversive than has been recognized. The eighth chapter asks whether, finally, we must accept Nietzsche's views.

I. The Horror of Existence

This book will argue that at the center of Nietzsche's vision lies his concept of the "terror and horror of existence."¹ As he puts it in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*:

"There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus. . . . When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is

utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.”²

Why is it best never to have been born? Because all we can expect as human beings is to suffer.³ Yet, still, this is not precisely the problem. In a passage most central to my interpretation of the horror of existence, a passage to which I will return again and again, and a passage found not in Nietzsche’s early but in one of his very late writings (at *Genealogy of Morals*, III, §28), Nietzsche tells us that human beings can live with suffering, what they *cannot* live with is *meaningless* suffering—suffering for no reason at all.⁴ In Nietzsche’s view, we are “surrounded by a fearful void. . . .”⁵ We live in an empty, meaningless cosmos. We cannot look into reality without being overcome. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche even says that “it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish. . . .”⁶

Moreover, it was not just intellectual reflection that led Nietzsche to a belief in the horror of existence. He lived it himself.⁷ In a letter of 10 April 1888, he writes: “Around 1876 my health grew worse. . . . There were extremely painful and obstinate headaches which exhausted all my strength. They increased over long years, to reach a climax at which pain was habitual, so that any given year contained for me two hundred days of pain. . . . My specialty was to endure the extremity of pain . . . with complete lucidity for two or three days in succession, with continuous vomiting of mucus.”⁸ In 1889, in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, he tells us how significant this suffering was for him:

I have often asked myself whether I am not much more deeply indebted to the hardest years of my life than to any others. . . . And as to my prolonged illness, do I not owe much more to it than I owe to my health? To it I owe a *higher* kind of health, a sort of health which grows stronger under everything that does not actually kill it!—*To it, I owe even my philosophy*. . . . Only great suffering is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit. . . . Only great suffering; that great suffering, under which we seem to be over a fire of greenwood, the suffering that takes its time—forces us philosophers to descend into our nethermost depths.⁹

In general, Nietzsche thinks that “every great philosophy . . . has been . . . the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir. . . .”¹⁰ I think Nietzsche’s suffering allowed him an insight into the horror of existence and I hope to show that this allowed him to develop a serious and radically different philosophical vision.

II. Dionysian Terror

There was another source of Nietzsche’s belief in the horror of existence. He was trained as a philologist and his study of classical antiquity convinced him that the Greeks had a special insight into this horror. To get at this insight, how-

ever, Nietzsche had to overthrow the reigning paradigm that had been established by Winckelmann and Schiller.¹¹

Schiller characterized the ancient Greek world as an age of beauty, naturalness, and unity.¹² The Greeks experienced a harmony and oneness with nature that Schiller called naive. Homer was the naive poet *par excellence*. Schiller contrasts this to the modern world which lacks such unity with nature and sentimentally strives for it as a lost ideal. Schiller says of the Greeks:

They *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature. Thus they depict at once our lost childhood, something that remains ever dearest to us, and for this reason they fill us with a certain melancholy.¹³

Recall the beauty of nature surrounding the ancient *Greeks*. . . . consider how very much nearer to the simplicity of nature lay its manner of thinking, its way of feeling, its mores. . . . For them the culture had not degenerated to such a degree that nature was left behind in the process. . . . One with himself and content in the feeling of his humanity, the Greek had to stand quietly by this humanity as his ultimate and to concern himself with bringing everything else closer to it.¹⁴

Schiller looks back to ancient Greece as a unified culture in harmony with itself and with nature, which then collapsed and gave rise to a sentimental striving after such unity as a lost ideal. The aspiration here is to set the Greek against the modern and to hope for a revival of Greek unity. Schiller wants to remake the modern world on Greek lines.

For Nietzsche, this vision of the ancient world sees only surface appearance. It completely misses the deeper reality. *There was no unity*. Greece was split, in violent opposition,¹⁵ in contradiction, *from the start*:

this harmony which is contemplated with such longing by modern man, in fact, this oneness of man with nature (for which Schiller introduced the technical term "naïve"), is by no means a simple condition that comes into being naturally and as if inevitably. It is not a condition that, like a terrestrial paradise, *must* necessarily be found at the gate of every culture. Only a romantic age could believe this, an age which conceived of the artist in terms of Rousseau's *Emile* and imagined that in Homer it had found such an artist Emile, reared at the bosom of nature. Where we encounter the "naïve" in art, we should recognize the highest effect of Apollinian culture—which always must first overthrow an empire of Titans and slay monsters, and which must have triumphed over an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering through recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions.¹⁶

The Apollonian, for Nietzsche, derives from the Olympian gods of Homer. It refers to a realm of clear, beautiful, plastic images. The Apollonian heals us with its beauty. It allows us to escape from pain. It makes life possible and

brings calm. It is beautiful illusion. It captures Schiller's concept of the naive.¹⁷ The Apollonian, however, is mere surface appearance. The Dionysian, on the other hand, derives from the older Orphic tradition of the Orient—from the pre-Olympian Titans. Dionysian ritual brings the collapse of appearance. It destroys one's sense of being a coherent individual. We are absorbed into a cosmic oneness. This involves a mixture of blissful ecstasy as well as pure blind terror—terror at the loss of self and blissful ecstasy over an intoxicating unity with nature, earth, the animal, the cosmos. The Dionysian is the reality behind surface appearance.¹⁸

Nietzsche describes the Dionysian experience as ceasing to be an artist and becoming the work of art.¹⁹ The individual is no longer an observer, contemplator, or creator. The individual is overwhelmed, absorbed into a primordial unity in which all individuality and separateness are annihilated. There is no longer a difference between subject and object: "nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man."²⁰ The Dionysian, Nietzsche tells us, reveals in nature "a sentimental trait; it is as if she were heaving a sigh at her dismemberment into individuals."²¹ Nietzsche himself suggests that the Dionysian is like Schiller's sentimental. It seeks a lost unity with nature. But the Dionysian is not modern. It already existed way back in ancient Greece, even before the Apollonian.

The Apollonian, then, is a veil that hides the terrifying Dionysian world from consciousness. This is the horrible need that forced the creation of the Olympian gods. They are an ideal version of ourselves which hide the terror of the cosmos that the Dionysian is aware of:

The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians. That overwhelming dismay in the face of the titanic powers of nature, the Moira enthroned inexorably over all knowledge, the vulture of the great lover of mankind, Prometheus, the terrible fate of the wise Oedipus, the family curse of the Atridae. . . . All this was again and again overcome by the Greeks with the aid of the Olympian *middle world* of art; or at any rate it was veiled and withdrawn from sight. It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods. . . . So that now, reversing the wisdom of Silenus, we might say of the Greeks that "to die soon is worst of all for them, the next worst—to die at all."²²

Dionysian terror was original and the Homeric Apollonian was a necessary response to veil it. Nietzsche links the Apollonian to Schiller's naive, but rejects the view that the naive-Apollonian was original and natural.²³ For Schiller, the sentimental only arises after the collapse of the naive and as a longing for the lost unity of the naive. For Nietzsche, it is precisely the reverse. The Dionysian-sentimental is original and fundamental, and the naive-Apollonian arises to hide the terrifying reality of the Dionysian. Homeric naiveté was the victory of Apollonian illusion. Only moderns can look back to Homer and see an undisturbed unity. They miss the terrible battle that had to be fought against the Dionysian.

What makes the Dionysian so terrible is not just the horror that it threatens but the fact that it can also evoke the prospect of a blissful ecstasy—an intoxicating unity with nature. This must be further explained.

At the biological-organic-natural level, human beings are one with nature. We are a part of nature and nature is the source of all life, activity, and creativity. At the biological level we are dependent upon nature and can be in harmony with it, but only as part of a primordial unity. To approach this unity can be intoxicating, an ecstasy, and we can have a sentimental longing for it—but it involves the total loss of human consciousness and individuality. We are just an element of nature, one with it, without consciousness, without any conscious distinction from it.²⁴

Besides being biological-organic-natural beings, however, we are also individual-conscious-human beings. Our unity with nature at the unconscious biological level is paralleled by a terrible alienation from nature at the level of consciousness. As conscious beings we find nature threatening and terrifying. It inevitably produces pain, suffering, and death. It cares nothing for consciousness and gets along quite well without it. Conscious individuals are terrified by nature's lack of concern for their needs—needs for meaning, purpose, and value.²⁵ For consciousness, nature is meaningless and valueless.

Individuation, Nietzsche tells us, is the source of all our suffering.²⁶ If we were not individuals, if we were simply one with primordial nature, we would not suffer. It is our separation from nature, our alienation from it, our individual consciousness, that brings suffering. Individuation, separation, dismemberment, Nietzsche suggests, are “the properly Dionysian *suffering*. . . .”²⁷ As a young boy, Dionysus was dismembered, torn into pieces, by the Titans. He was then restored and brought back to life by Zeus.

Aristotle, in identifying the human essence, set aside the life of nutrition and growth common to the rest of nature, as well as the life of perception common to all animals, and argued that rational activity is the proper and unique function of humans.²⁸ It is *precisely* the latter, for Nietzsche, that makes for the horror of existence. Lacking rational consciousness, we could be one with existence like the rest of nature. Instead, we find that nature does not care about our need for meaning. Consciousness cannot bear this emptiness, this threat to its existence, this terrifying void. If we come to see that existence really is meaningless, that we suffer for no reason at all, that existence simply cannot provide what is required by the sort of consciousness we possess, and if this realization sinks in, if it gains possession of us, it will paralyze us and may even actually kill us.

Nietzsche is not out to dismiss individual conscious life and just embrace an ecstatic Dionysian affirmation of the organic. Nor is he out to do just the opposite: we cannot eliminate, close out, totally suppress, the Dionysian—that would be to cut ourselves off from life, creativity, nature. Nietzsche thinks that the Apollonian did tend to close out the Dionysian more than was desirable—and he certainly thinks that since then philosophy, science, and Christianity have done

so even more. Nietzsche rejects both the pure Dionysian and the pure Apollonian.

III. Tragedy

Nietzsche wants a balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and he finds that balance in Greek tragedy.²⁹ It gives us the proper blend of reality and illusion, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The Dionysian chorus discharges itself in the Apollonian world of images, dialogue, and dramatic action that is epic in nature—but which is only a veneer.³⁰ The outcome of tragedy is never redemption at the Apollonian level, Nietzsche thinks, but always the destruction, the crushing, by a cruel and uncaring cosmos, of the conscious individual—the dramatic, active, heroic, Homeric individual.

Tragic drama and music allow us to understand the delight felt at this crushing of the individual. They reveal eternal life continuing beyond all phenomena and in spite of destruction. They allow us to take a metaphysical joy in the negation of the tragic hero—the negation of all phenomena and the affirmation of eternal life unaffected by annihilation. We take deep joy in this reality behind appearance.³¹

The tragic hero, Nietzsche thinks, is simply Dionysus—and all other characters too are mere masks for that original hero. The hero is the Dionysus who experiences the suffering of individuation in being dismembered by the Titans. And tragic art is the joyful hope that the spell of individuation can be broken and oneness restored.³² In tragedy:

we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear. . . . We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. . . . In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.³³

The tragic hero, “like a powerful Titan, takes the whole Dionysian world upon his back and thus relieves us of this burden.”³⁴ The individual is crushed, not in the Hegelian sense in which the individual is sacrificed so that ethical principles can evolve at the Apollonian level. Rather the individual is crushed and fused with primal being—with Dionysian reality. The Apollonian gives us enough distance, provides enough of a veil, so that we can feel this collapse and fusion with primal Dionysian being as powerful and creative—without being annihilated by it.³⁵

Tragedy gives us an explanation of suffering, as well as of the dignity of the human condition. There is a metaphysical contradiction at the heart of reality that is revealed in tragedy as a clash of the divine and the human,³⁶ the Olympi-

ans and the Titans, and the suffering that results for humans. It is Dionysian wisdom that recognizes this very un-Apollonian reality.

Nietzsche profoundly disagrees with Aristotle's conception of tragedy.³⁷ Aristotle often considers the views of other thinkers and tries to give them a place in his own thought, but not the tragedians, not the wisdom that there is a metaphysical contradiction at the heart of existence, not the view that it is best never to have been born. Aristotle cannot and will not accept the horror of existence. And thus tragedy cannot express the essence of the human condition for him. Instead, tragedy must occur due to the fault of the tragic hero. The whole idea of a tragic flaw, Nietzsche might have said, was a ruse designed to make the tragic hero responsible for what the tragedians, certainly Sophocles, correctly understood as the horror of existence. And the tragic hero's suffering arouses pity in us because, for Aristotle, such suffering is not the human condition generally, after all, but merely something that happened to this poor fellow. It also arouses fear because it could happen even to us, but, Aristotle hastens to add, tragic drama is designed to *purge* this pity and fear and bring about catharsis.³⁸ Among the sorts of plots to be avoided by proper tragedy are those in which a good man passes to bad fortune.³⁹ For Nietzsche, on the other hand, that is *exactly and precisely* what tragedy is about.⁴⁰ Suffering *is* the human condition. The tragic hero is all of us.

IV. Rebirth of the Greek Ideal

As we begin to read the *Birth of Tragedy*, it seems that Nietzsche completely rejects Schiller's ideal of ancient Greece and the hope for its rebirth in the modern world. But it becomes clearer and clearer as we proceed, first, that Nietzsche *does* see Greek culture as an ideal. Every age and culture, he says, has tried to free itself from the Greeks because their own achievement seemed to lose life and become shriveled in comparison.⁴¹ It is negatively put, but the Greeks are clearly taken as an ideal. In another passage, Nietzsche puts it as follows:

One feels ashamed and afraid in the presence of the Greeks . . . the Greeks, as charioteers, hold in their hands the reins of our own and every other culture, but . . . almost always chariot and horses are of inferior quality and not up to the glory of their leaders, who consider it sport to run such a team into an abyss which they themselves clear with the leap of Achilles.⁴²

But, second, more than this, it eventually becomes clear that Nietzsche even thinks that there *can* be a rebirth of the Greek ideal. "Let no one," he says, "try to blight our faith in a yet-impending rebirth of Hellenic antiquity; for this alone gives us hope for a renovation and purification of the German spirit through the fire magic of music."⁴³ Nietzsche clearly wants a return of the Greek ideal, but not Schiller's Homeric-Apollonian-naive ideal. He wants the Dionysian-tragic ideal of music. And he sees the gradual awakening of this Dionysian spirit in

Bach, Beethoven, and especially Wagner.⁴⁴ One day the Dionysian spirit will awaken in Germany with “all the morning freshness following a tremendous sleep: then it will slay dragons, destroy vicious dwarfs, wake Brünnhilde—and even Wotan’s spear will not be able to stop its course!”⁴⁵

It is true that Nietzsche’s discussion of the rebirth of the Greek ideal through German music occurs in sections 16 to 25 of the *Birth of Tragedy*, which were only added to the second edition of the text. Kaufmann thinks these sections on the rebirth of tragedy should not have been added, that they weaken the book, and that they were soon regretted by Nietzsche.⁴⁶

It is quite true that Nietzsche soon regretted his views on Wagner,⁴⁷ but it is not at all clear that Nietzsche regretted his belief in the rebirth of the Greek ideal. Even in *Ecce Homo*, one of Nietzsche’s last books, he says:

In the end I lack all reason to renounce the hope for a Dionysian future of music. Let us look ahead a century; let us suppose that my attempt to assassinate two millennia of antinature and desecration of man were to succeed. That new party of life . . . would again make possible that excess of life on earth from which the Dionysian state, too, would have to awaken again. I promise a tragic age: the highest art in saying Yes to life, tragedy, will be reborn.⁴⁸

Moreover, I think we will see as we proceed that Nietzsche’s ultimate solution to the horror of existence, that is, eternal recurrence, can itself be seen as reviving the tragic ideal.

V. Dionysian Life

We must also notice, as the passage just quoted at the end of the previous section implies, that tragedy is important and valuable because it sees deeply into the horror of existence and yet, nevertheless, it is able to *affirm life*. Silenus told us that it is best never to have been born, second best to die as soon as possible. That, I think we must conclude, is the perspective of an immortal for whom the suffering of us mortals is pitiful. Mortals at times will be tempted to agree with his advice, but they also are capable of mustering the strength to reject it. The reason Nietzsche is so attracted to the Greeks is not simply because they recognized the horror of existence, but because they overcame it. For Nietzsche, while existence is horrible, nevertheless, *life* is of the highest value.

For Nietzsche, the concept of life, we must be careful to notice, includes both the life of the individual and the life of the whole—the vast, teeming, indestructible, overwhelming flow of the totality of life. The latter involves the death of individuals, even individual species. *Individual* life must perish for the life of the *whole* to proceed. *Life*, we must remember, is a concept that includes *both* of these sides.⁴⁹

Life is a “dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself.”⁵⁰ Life, we will come to see, is will to power. It will assert itself whatever happens. Life is

larger than the individual. The individual may perish, indeed, *must* perish, but life continues. Insofar as the individual identifies only with itself, it sees that life does not need it or care about it. It will suffer and die while life as a whole continues to flourish—and *that* is the horror of existence. Insofar as the individual identifies with the primordial life of the whole, however, the individual can experience an intoxicating, blissful unity and has no difficulty in affirming life.

Dionysus is the god of life—life in *both* its senses. Dionysus affirms life. Despite death and destruction, despite the loss of individual life, despite painful and cruel dismemberment, despite the horror of existence, overpowering life always returns and continues. Life “is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich, and capable of deifying to do so. . . . Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.”⁵¹ The Dionysian, Nietzsche tells us, means:

an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction.⁵²

Nietzsche uses the term ‘Dionysian’ ambiguously. Sometimes it refers to that pure raging torrent of life which includes death for the individual. To enter the Dionysian in this sense involves ecstasy, but it means that we do not return, we perish—or at least we are likely to perish. At other times, the term ‘Dionysian’ is used to refer to that situation where we have enough of a veil so that we can experience this raging torrent of life without succumbing to it, without perishing, indeed, while being invigorated by it.

The issue, then, is to embrace life, to be invigorated by it, without succumbing to the horror of existence, without perishing. What is required, we have seen, is illusion, lies, or to put it more congenially—*art*. We need enough of a veil so that we can be invigorated by the life of the whole without being destroyed by the horror of existence.

This raises a serious tangle that we will have to face. Clark writes: “Nietzsche seems to take as his measure of value what is ‘life-promoting. . . .’ If his commitment to truth came into conflict with the affirmation of life or the promotion of its interests, Nietzsche would have to consider life the higher value.” I think this is correct and I fully agree with this interpretation. However, Clark continues: “But it is difficult to see how his commitment to truth could conflict with his affirmation of life.”⁵³ It is not at all difficult to see this, unless one has failed to appreciate the centrality for Nietzsche of the horror of existence. Truth and life are opposed. To have one is to lose the other. Get too close to truth and you lose your life. To remain alive requires that we keep a distance from the truth. This will have to be explored at length in the next chapter.

VI. Three Visions

Nietzsche's belief in the horror of existence is largely, if not completely, overlooked by most scholars.⁵⁴ I hope to show that it had a profound effect on his thought. I do not want to *reduce* Nietzsche's thought to the horror of existence. I do not want to claim that it is the *essence* of his thought—a magic key to it. I do not want to oversimplify the thought of a very complex thinker. My claim is more modest and limited. It is simply that Nietzsche cannot be adequately understood without seeing the significance the horror of existence had for him. To begin to understand its importance, let us consider three different visions of the human condition.

The first holds that we live in a benign cosmos. It is as if it were purposively planned for us and we for it. We fit, we belong, we are at home in this cosmos. We are confirmed and reinforced by it. Our natural response is a desire to know it, and thus to appreciate our fit into it. Let us call this the *designed cosmos*. Roughly speaking, it is the traditional view held by most philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through the medievals. And it has largely disappeared in the modern world—few really believe in it any more.

The second vision backs off from the metaphysical assumptions required by the first. This view starts with Francis Bacon, if not before, and is the view of most moderns. Here the cosmos is neither alien nor is it designed for us. It is neither terrifying nor benign. The cosmos is neutral and, most importantly, it is malleable. Human beings must come to understand the cosmos through science and control it through technology. We must *make* it fit us. It does not fit us by design. We must work on it, transform it, and mold it into a place where we can be at home. We must create our own place. For such modern thinkers, we actually end up with more than the ancients and medievals had. We end up with a fit like they had, but we have the added satisfaction of bringing it about *ourselves*, accomplishing it through our own endeavor, individuality, and freedom. Let us call this the *perfectible cosmos*.

The third vision takes the cosmos to be alien. It was not designed for human beings at all, nor they for it. We do not fit. We do not belong. *And we never will*. The cosmos is horrible, terrifying, and we will never surmount this fact. It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all. Let us call this the *horrific cosmos*. This is Nietzsche's view.

Nietzsche simply dismisses the first view, the designed cosmos, which few believe in anymore anyway.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Nietzsche takes the second view, that of a perfectible cosmos, very seriously. He resists it with every fiber of his being.⁵⁶ For Nietzsche, we must stop wasting time and energy hoping to change things, improve them, make progress⁵⁷—the outlook of liberals, socialists, feminists, even Christians, all of whom Nietzsche tends to lump together and excoriate. For Nietzsche, we cannot eliminate suffering and to keep hoping we can will only weaken us. Instead, we must conceal an alien and terrifying cosmos if we hope to live in it. And we must develop the strength to do so. We

must toughen ourselves. We need more suffering, not less. It has "created all enhancements of man so far. . . ." ⁵⁸

Danto thinks that Nietzsche has a "blind spot with regard to social reform." And Danto thinks it "misleading and absurd to counter programs for the elimination of pain with the broad statement that *life* is pain and struggle. . . ." ⁵⁹ After all, we might imagine a philosophy of medicine whose view of suffering was that it cannot be reduced and perhaps should even be increased? Such a position would not be a popular one. Nevertheless, it is a serious mistake to think that what we have on Nietzsche's part is a "blind spot"—some sort of *hang-up*. Nietzsche has thought through the horror of existence thoroughly and deeply. The fact that most people we know do not feel that existence is horrible does not make Nietzsche's position absurd. After all, most people in the world, even today, *do* in fact lead a pretty miserable existence, one that at the very least involves some serious suffering of one sort or another.

If we look deeply into the essence of things, into the horror of existence, Nietzsche thinks we will be overwhelmed—paralyzed. Like Hamlet we will not be able to act, because we see that action can "not change anything in the eternal nature of things." ⁶⁰ We must see, Nietzsche says, that "a profound *illusion* . . . first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakeable faith that thought . . . can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct. . . ." ⁶¹ In Nietzsche's view, we cannot change things. Instead, with Hamlet we should "feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that [we] should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint." ⁶²

One might think this silly. After all, isn't it just obvious that we can change things, reduce suffering, improve existence, make progress? Isn't it just obvious that modern science and technology have done so? Isn't it just absurd for Nietzsche to reject the possibility of significant change? Hasn't such change already occurred?

Well, perhaps not. Even modern environmentalists might resist all this *obviousness*. They might respond in a rather Nietzschean vein that technology may have caused as many problems as it has solved. The advocate of the perfectible cosmos, on the other hand, would no doubt counter such Nietzschean pessimism by arguing that even if technology does cause some problems, the solution to those problems can only come from better technology. Honesty requires us to admit, however, that this is merely a *hope*, not something for which we already have evidence, not something which it is absurd to doubt—not at all something *obvious*. Further technology may or may not improve things. The widespread use of antibiotics seems to have done a miraculous job of improving our health and reducing suffering, but we are also discovering that such antibiotics give rise to even more powerful bacteria that are immune to those antibiotics. We have largely eliminated diseases like cholera, smallpox, and tuberculosis, but we have produced cancer and heart disease. We can cure syphilis and gonorrhea, but we now have AIDS.

Even if we could show that it will be possible to continuously reduce suffering, still we must admit that it is very unlikely that we will ever eliminate it. If that is so, if there will always be some suffering, then it remains a real question whether it is not better to face suffering, use it as a discipline, perhaps even increase it, so as to toughen ourselves, rather than let it weaken us, allow it to dominate us, by our continually hoping to overcome it. We will have to address this issue at length as we proceed.

But whatever we think about the possibility of reducing suffering, the question may well become moot. Nietzsche tells a story:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.⁶³

Whatever progress we might think we are making in reducing suffering, whatever change we think we are bringing about, it may all amount to nothing more than a short and accidental moment in biological time, whose imminent disappearance will finally confirm the horror and meaninglessness of existence.

The disagreement here is not so much about the quantity of suffering that we can expect to find in the world, but its *nature*. For proponents of the designed cosmos, suffering is basically accidental. It is not fundamental or central to life. It is not a necessary part of the nature of things. It does not make up the essence of existence. We must develop virtue, and then we can basically expect to fit and be at home in the cosmos. For the proponents of a perfectible cosmos, suffering is neither essential nor unessential. The cosmos is neutral. We must work on it to reduce suffering. We must bring about our own fit. For Nietzsche, even if we can change this or that, even if we can reduce suffering here and there, what cannot be changed for human beings is that suffering is fundamental and central to life. The very *nature* of things, the very *essence* of existence, means suffering.⁶⁴ Moreover, it means *meaningless* suffering—suffering for no reason at all. That cannot be changed—it can only be concealed.

Nietzsche does not reject *all* forms of change—after all, as we will see, he has a theory of will to power and of the *Übermensch*. What he rejects is the sort of change necessary for a perfectible cosmos. He rejects the notion that science and technology can transform the eternal nature of things—he rejects the notion that human effort can end or significantly reduce physical suffering. Instead, he only thinks it possible to build up the power necessary to construct meaning in a meaningless world and thus to hide the horror of existence. The horror of existence cannot be eliminated. It can only be concealed.

We cannot prove the opposite and I do not think we can dismiss Nietzsche's view simply because it goes counter to the assumptions of Christianity, science, liberalism, socialism, feminism, and so forth. And we certainly cannot dismiss

this view if we hope to understand Nietzsche. At any rate, for Nietzsche, we cannot eliminate suffering, we can only seek to mask it.

Still, one might want to insist that Nietzsche cannot be committed to a horrific cosmos because he very obviously believes in joy. While it is quite true that Nietzsche does believe in joy, it does not follow from this that he cannot also believe in a horrific cosmos. If Nietzsche held that the horror of existence could simply be eliminated or significantly reduced and a certain amount of joy produced, then he *would* be rejecting a horrific cosmos (and endorsing a perfectible one). I do not think evidence can be found to show that Nietzsche believes that this sort of transformation of the world is possible. On the other hand, one might concede that Nietzsche does not think we can change the world to significantly reduce horror and produce joy, but that the world *itself* is just mixed—some aspects of it produce horror and other aspects joy. In other words, here we would need a fourth model—that of a *mixed cosmos*. There is, however, another possibility. It is that Nietzsche does not believe in a mixed cosmos at all, he believes in a horrific one, not in the sense that every last detail must be horrific, but in the sense that the world is *essentially* horrific. Joy can arise in this world, but it arises *despite* the horror of existence, *along* with it, *without* removing the horror or significantly reducing it. I will argue that this is Nietzsche's view.⁶⁵ At any rate, if Nietzsche's belief in the horror of existence has somehow not yet been sufficiently demonstrated, support for this belief will be reinforced again and again by text after text as we proceed.