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# Nietzsche and Self-Care – How is Nihilism Like a Coloring Book?

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## **Abstract**

An age of seemingly unyielding stress and tension presents questions of how best to avoid or ameliorate societal pressures. A number of methods have gained popularity in recent years, giving rise to an industry centered around the concept of self-care. My aim is to demonstrate that, while the importance of caring for one's own physical and mental well-being is a worthwhile endeavor, its practical application is rooted in an escapist ideology that ignores an underlying and more pertinent question; namely, whether the stress of the world ought to be avoided at all. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose influence has persisted in the century since his death, would seem to argue that stress is necessary, and avoidance of it is a mistake. My paper will demonstrate that the contemporary approach to self-care based on the current psychological definition can be viewed as an embracing of Nietzsche's priestly morality in that it is reactionary, views the world ahistorically, and is life-negating. I will further investigate the detriments and nihilistic consequences of embracing self-care as an ethical imperative, and will explore what a productive response to stress might entail from a Nietzschean perspective.

*Keywords:* ethics, morality, Nietzsche, nihilism, self-care

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## Introduction

“I am an opponent of the disgraceful modern softening of feelings” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.5). Nietzsche writes this in the preface to his work, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. He is speaking of a widely spreading phenomenon that he refers to as a “morality of compassion” in which self-denial and self-sacrifice are lauded as morally superior positions (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.4). It would seem, then, that caring for oneself, viewing one’s own needs as paramount, would be more palatable to Nietzsche. Perhaps he would be delighted to learn of the contemporary conception of self-care, defined in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* as giving appropriate consideration to one’s own physical and psychological wellness (Beauchamp, et al., 2001). Nietzsche’s philosophical works are grounded in notions of affirmative self-cultivation, which appear, at face value, to comport with this description. In *The Gay Science*, he impels us to become “...human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves” (Nietzsche, 1882/2010, section 335, para.8). Nietzsche outlines in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, his historical account of the development of moral codes, that our present morality emerged from a revolt by the priestly class against the noble class in which a “spiritual revenge” was taken on the latter so that all they held as ‘good’, their “powerful physicality” and “strong, free, cheerful-hearted activity” were devalued (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.16).

Self-care, as it is defined, might fit these noble pursuits, however, it has been presented and implemented in the subdued style of the priestly class revolt as a reaction to the inescapable stress of the world, and has further been called an ethical imperative (Barnett, 2008). This is a dangerous move, as are moral judgments in general according to Nietzsche, who deemed that we tend to consider ‘right’ those things that appear to us to be conditional for our existence, and we

believe this to be the case because we are repeatedly told it is so Nietzsche, 1882/2010). For Nietzsche, the acceptance of something on these grounds is untenable as his project sought to determine the origins of our ethical models. Drawing from primary themes within Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* as well as insights from several of his other works, I will demonstrate that the contemporary approach to self-care based on the current psychological definition can be viewed as an embracing of Nietzsche's priestly morality in that it is reactionary, views the world ahistorically, and is life-negating rather than life-affirming, and will seek to illustrate that the embracing of this notion of self-care as a necessity constitutes a nihilistic stance.

### **Summary**

Self-care is described as an ethical mandate by the American Psychological Association (APA), which incorporates its definition and purported relevance within its Ethics Code (American Psychological Association, 2003). It is done in this fashion as a response to perceived problems in the world that are at once beyond our control and antithetical to our happiness. A response in itself need not hearken to the reactionary style of the priestly morality, but becomes so when it places a universal value judgment on the matter to which it responds. In the case of self-care as a response to stress, it is clear that stress has been assigned a negative value. This is substantiated by the language used by the APA when professing the importance of self-care and outlining implementation strategies.

One article which underscores the cruciality of self-care for students cites a study that declares, "...seventy percent of graduate students reported at least one stressful event was impairing their optimal functioning" (El-Ghoroury, 2011, para.2). Here we see stress presented as a detriment, one that impedes daily activities and hinders accomplishment. Another article,

addressing the necessity for self-care during the winter holiday season from the Maryland Psychological Association, speaks of tumult and overwhelm during this purportedly joyful period of the year due to “high expectations” and “...pressure to be everything to everyone” (Reeves, 2019, para.4). This is an example of the view that stress, which is here, as well, illustrated in a negative fashion in order to promote the essentiality of self-care, stems from the demands of the world which we have internalized and must combat. In this sense, the notion of self-care is indeed reactionary as Nietzsche purports the priestly morality to be. He writes, “...in order to come into being, slave-morality always needs an opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all” (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.19). The need for self-care comes about in just this manner. It is a reaction to oppression, specifically the oppression of stress, which is determined by proponents of self-care to be a systematic inevitability.

Nietzsche is supremely critical of thinkers who, by his evaluation, take an ahistorical approach to morality, claiming that many philosophers present an origin story of moral precepts that does not comport with their evolutionary process (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.10). He seeks to present this evolution, and cautions against a blanket acceptance of conjectured ineludible claims, relating that our perception has been granted to us by an historical process of pain, torment, and sacrifice that fitted humanity with a “social straitjacket,” a set of “fixed ideas” about the world and how we ought to behave lest we violate the established social order and invite retribution (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, pp.36-39). This, he says, eventually gave way to a “bad conscience” in which we internalized the values that promoted socially acceptable behavior (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, pp.56-57). Morality, then, as Nietzsche comes to understand it, is the culmination of this process, the internalization of notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that were not

bestowed or thrust upon us by some external force; not discovered, but created by us alone over the course of human history.

As such, all moral valuations stem from these notions that were forged by human suffering at human hands, whose origins have been erased in favor of retaining only the “fixed ideas” that dictate our sociality and demand our obedience. In our context, stress is one of these “fixed ideas,” and is offered as both impetus and explanation for self-care as a requirement. Just as Nietzsche accuses ethicists and historians of thinking ahistorically by failing to investigate the origin and evolution of our values and disregarding the importance of this process, so too have the propagators of self-care failed to investigate or encourage us to explore the roots of the stressors they claim are plaguing us and making self-care essential to our survival (Nietzsche, 1887/1998, p.10). Rather, they make a value judgment about stress itself; namely, as in the case of those other ideas that have evolved to be viewed as injurious to human existence and, therefore, demand a prescribed set of combative behaviors on our part, that it is both inescapable and contemptible.

This condemnation of stress points to a life-negating trend within the notion of self-care which is reminiscent of the Nietzschean conception of nihilism, and, most specifically, his notion of radical nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism emerges in any age with the realization that our highest values have devalued themselves. It is not a rejection of these values but the presumption of them that leads us into nihilism; specifically, the understanding that we ourselves have created our values rather than deriving them from an objective, transcendent source, which, for Nietzsche, does not exist (Allison, 2018). While the religious nihilist continues appeals to a source outside the world from which value might be derived, Nietzsche’s radical nihilist rejects the existence of any outside source of value for the world. The radical nihilist, though, retains a

“belief in rational categories,” by which is meant the view that the world ought to have value, and would have value if only “purpose,” “unity,” and/or “truth” could be located within it. As these cannot be located, the radical nihilist condemns the world (Allison, 2018, p.5).

The condemnation of stress presents this on a microcosmic scale as it is anathematized for its presumed lack of inherent or instrumental value. This brings forth a need to eradicate it since it has been judged detrimental while paradoxically expressing that this cannot be accomplished. Therefore, we are left only with methods of amelioration, among which include such remedies as physical activity, guided meditation, requesting support from one’s social circle, journaling, and seeking ‘balance’, all of which are vague, if not arbitrary value judgments in their own right (El-Ghoroury, 2011). For a more concrete example of the influence of this line of thinking, we can look to Amazon’s top-selling book of April 2015, which was Johanna Basford’s *Secret Garden: An Inky Treasure Hunt and Coloring Book*. Basford capitalized on a trend of marketing coloring books to adults as a tool for alleviating stress and cultivating mindfulness (McAfee, 2015).

This is a life-negating stance because, rather than promoting the activity as a joy in itself, it is presented in prescriptive fashion for the manufactured ailment of stress, which has been vilified in a manner that almost grants it sentience. It provides a point of focus that is outside the scope of reality and encourages separating oneself from the world, both of which constitute nihilistic tendencies. More abominably for Nietzsche, this trend of ameliorating what has been judged ‘bad’ on the sole basis of belief and without historical evaluation does not affirm life. Rather, it removes us from life, negating the world as it is and affirming an ideal world in which we are free to detach when we experience pressure or discomfort (Nietzsche, 1887/1998). It

advocates a rejection of pain over a repurposing of it, which would require an active acceptance of the world as it is toward creativity and cultivation.

### **Critique**

I have claimed that self-care in contemporary practice is reactionary, however, self-care tactics need not be used only in direct response to the upset and overwhelm of stress. It is prudent to consider whether self-care might be employed in a manner that promotes the concern for one's physical and psychological wellness in a non-reactionary fashion. Could it be the case, for example, that self-care is a preemptive strategy, anticipatory rather than reactionary? That self-care can be practiced in the absence of stressful situations is not at issue, and self-care methods can certainly be implemented proactively with the goal in mind of avoiding or mitigating future stress. I would contend, though, that it must always be considered reactionary if presented as a means to a specific end. Self-care is touted by the APA as an ethical mandate, and, as such, is advocated for with an overarching goal in mind, which here has been identified as the avoidance or mitigation of stress. It is a reactionary measure, even when practiced preemptively, because of this greater ideal that is strived toward with its execution.

Nietzsche provides us a glimpse of his own goal-setting in *The Gay Science*, where he shares a resolution to "...be only a yes-sayer" (Nietzsche, 1882/2010, section 276, para.1). By this, he means to fully embrace, and even come to love, all that life offers. I have alleged that self-care is life-negating for its emergence as a necessity from the condemnation of stress. However, it is important to question whether, in criticizing the view of stress as somehow inherently negative, I am proposing the reverse to be true. As discussed, Nietzsche aims to steer us away from moral valuations, so it would be equally erroneous to claim that stress is 'good' as it is to condemn it. Rather, in accordance with Nietzsche's line of thought, stress ought to be



removed from both moral categories and viewed only as part of the world with neither a positive nor a negative connotation.

As part of the world, though, stress does impact us, and its effects can, at the very least, *feel* detrimental. It would be both callous and an improper application of Nietzsche's thought to suggest that these feelings ought to be ignored. Nietzsche, after all, is not among the philosophers who view reason and critical thinking as ultimate and universal goals. As he writes, "dialectic is chosen only as a last resort...nothing can be wiped away more easily than a dialectician's effect..." (Nietzsche, 1888/2001, p.174). Instead, in his striving to affirm life as a "yes-sayer," Nietzsche recognizes that the inherent chaos of life can have a deindividuating effect that is, at times, unbearable. This, he calls life's Dionysian force, recalling the foundation of Ancient Greek on art and tragedy (Nietzsche, 1872/2001, p.121). There is, according to Nietzsche, a need for an Apollonian force, as well; one that can limit this chaos and place upon it "necessary fictions" which aid us setting boundaries around life's complexity (Nietzsche, 1872/2001, pp.121-122).

While he expresses a desire to embrace the Dionysian force as much as possible, he does not see it as the role of either force to conquer the other, but advocates for a merging of sorts. Could self-care, the act of removing oneself from the stress of the world instead of facing it head-on, be considered an appeal to the Apollonian force, a "necessary fiction" rather than a life-negating practice? There is, indeed, research to suggest that taking a break from a stressful task, momentarily setting it aside, can improve productivity and overall performance in a work setting (Peart, 2019). It seems, then, that in a task-oriented environment, brief reprieves from the stress of work can aid in accomplishing the tasks at hand with greater ease. Though the question remains whether this fulfills the prescription of self-care we have been handed, and I argue that it

does not. While time away from a task for the purpose of refocusing in a work environment has proven beneficial, this addresses stress of a very specific sort. Self-care, by its definition, aims to mitigate a more general stress, one that is described as permeating the entirety of our lives. Furthermore, this broader stress, unlike the distinct task-related stress described, is not relieved upon the completion of a given task, and removing oneself from stressors is not intended to improve performance or productivity, but merely to avoid for a short duration of time the inescapable dread and overwhelm brought about by stress. Once the break is over, nothing has been gained and the stressors are still viewed negatively. We have removed ourselves from the world only to be thrown back into the same world with no additional resources besides, perhaps, a beautifully colored page.

### **Conclusion**

Self-care activities are not promoted for their own sake, which detracts from our ability to enjoy them for themselves regardless of what pleasure they might bring about, but are touted as stress-relievers, means to an ultimately unachievable end. Instead of a temporary removal of ourselves from the world, life-affirming actions promote our agency, our will, lending themselves more freely to accomplishment (Nietzsche, 1887/1998). While the impetus to practice self-care seems at first to be an assertion of one's own independently-determined will, it is, in actuality, a promotion of Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* from which the priestly morality developed (Nietzsche, 1887/1998). A value judgment is made against the stress of the world, and from this, self-care is offered as a reaction to it. We are not prompted to seek its origin or give further consideration to its potential worth or usefulness. This would require the sort of historical investigation and revaluation of our values for which Nietzsche advocates in *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

Among Nietzsche's most prominent themes in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is the relevance of investigating the origins of our ideas and learning of their evolution. In doing so with respect to morality, he finds that our notions of 'good' and 'bad' were not derived from a transcendental source, but brought about through efforts to dominate, control, and manipulate. Their eventual development into moral codes and the individual internalization of those codes occurred not through divine revelation but at our hands over the course of history. Nietzsche demonstrates through historical and etymological investigation how our conceptions, usages, and moral valuations of 'right' and 'wrong' have been altered over time. We can see how these alterations have been profoundly influential on contemporary value judgments against stress. Nietzsche drives the point that such judgments have been repeatedly and painfully, in quite a literal sense, inflicted upon us so that we have come to associate pain with negative value judgments (Nietzsche, 1887/1998). In taking a Nietzschean genealogical approach to stress, we might see not only how we have come to denounce it, but, even more significantly, how its definition and popular usage have changed throughout the ages to comport with this narrative of condemnation.

The presentation of self-care as an ethical imperative is a further illustration of Nietzsche's priestly morality in that it endorses rejection of the world and removal of oneself from it toward the end of mitigating the suffering caused by the world. It lacks any drive to provide historical context in order to make sense of this suffering, so it is rendered both repugnant and senseless, yet unconquerable. In this, the will of the individual is ignored completely, and our agency, a condition for Nietzsche's view of the manner in which history is perpetuated by human accomplishment, is diminished.

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