Friedrich Nietzsche: Ardent critic of societal reactions to unorthodoxy and non-conformism

Srabana Bhattacherjee[1], Dipanjan Bhattacharjee[2*], Basudeb Das[3]

[1]Psychiatric Social Work Tutor, Central Institute of Psychiatry, Kanke, Ranchi, India
[2]Professor of Psychiatric Social Work, Post Graduate Institute of Behavioural & Medical Sciences (PGIBAMS), Raipur, India
[3]Professor of Psychiatry, Central Institute of Psychiatry, Kanke, Ranchi, India

ABSTRACT

Friedrich Nietzsche is a fascinating and controversial figure known for his unconventional views on health and illness. His rejection of traditional psychological sickness approaches has garnered praise and criticism. He is renowned for his unyielding criticisms of conventional morality, religion, and societal norms, often based on psychological diagnoses uncovering flawed thinking and beliefs. Additionally, Nietzsche used his psychological analyses to craft innovative theories about the self and propose new values to spark cultural renewal and improve people's social and psychological well-being. These proposals sought to supplant the outdated values he found fault with. This article attempts to delve into his ideas concerning mental health in terms of his thoughts on health and illness.

Keywords: Nietzsche, health, illness, morality, and society

BACKGROUND

The 19th century was a time of great philosophical transformation and discord in Western Europe. Philosophers engaged in debates and offered opposing viewpoints, leading to the creation and dismantling of numerous philosophical concepts. Theories and philosophies were created to justify political imperialism, advocating ideological positions such as "idealism," "liberalism," and "utilitarianism," and so on. Industrialization brought competition among major imperial forces, resulting in bloodshed and a war-torn Europe. The rapid progress of science and economics, as well as philosophy, shook the intellectual mind sets of the world. In this situation, a new and novel philosophical stance derived by German Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche created a massive commotion in the philosophical fraternity of Western Europe by questioning the age-old traditionalistic views, institutions, dogmas and especially society's views on morality, normality and abnormality. His new and innovative philosophical approach created a significant stir in the philosophical community of Western Europe. His ideas challenged long-standing traditional views, institutions, and dogmas, particularly society's perceptions of morality, normality, and abnormality.[1,2]

Nietzsche: Core Philosophical Outlooks

Against this backdrop, another person entered the picture, Friedrich Nietzsche. His arrival led to a huge stir in the German and Austro-Prussian philosophical community, and the excitement spread throughout the enlightened world, especially Western Europe. He simultaneously was a brilliant and unconventional philosopher who stood apart from the mainstream philosophical traditions dominant in 19th Century Western Philosophy. His unique perspective has made him a key

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Dipanjan Bhattacharjee
Professor of Psychiatric Social Work
Post Graduate Institute of Behavioural and Medical Sciences (PGIBAMS), Raipur – 492001, India
Email: dipanpsw@gmail.com

figure in contemporary philosophy. The intellectual community greatly respects him due to his unwavering and persistent critiques of European moral and religious doctrines, common philosophical concepts and societal and political ideals linked to so-called modernity and progress. The impact of his perspective on truth, morality, language, aesthetics, cultural theory, history, nihilism, power, consciousness, and the meaning of existence is undeniable. Even after more than a century since his passing, his influence continues to be a subject of discourse among knowledgeable communities worldwide. Throughout his life, Nietzsche constantly questioned established institutions and their logical viability in the world and societal orthodoxy in accepting people with specific ideologies and qualities. He applied his psychological analyses to support original theories about the nature of the self. He strongly believed in introducing new values for cultural renewal and improving social and psychological life by abandoning older and outdated dogma and values.[1-8] He thought the persistence of those old and obsolete values and philosophy would lead to a stalemate condition for society, where no new, naïve, and novel ideas could develop, and an all-compassing unidimensional thought process would dominate the world. According to him, the creation of values always questions the existing philosophical base, which is held as the *'true'* or *'truthful'* and widely regarded as *'perennially true'* or *'unsurpassable'*. He hammered this traditional view associated with 'values' - Nietzsche treated value as "created" rather than discovered in the world. He attempted to differentiate between *'values'* and *'desires'*. In his opinion, these two concepts can positively affect a particular object or situation. Still, valuing involves an objective element, and this particular property is absent in desires. If an individual becomes convinced that something they value is no longer valuable, they will likely revise their values accordingly, indicating that valuing is influenced by external factors.[1,2,4-6,8,9] On the other hand, subjective desires often persist even when an individual acknowledges that the objects of their desires are not desirable or unattainable. Many readers struggle to understand the specific *"positive"* values that he advocates for and the broader philosophical questions surrounding the creation of values.

One reason for this ongoing confusion may stem from Nietzsche's departure from traditional philosophical approaches that provide clear-cut definitions of *"goodness."* Rather than relying on a single principle, Nietzsche celebrates various values without attempting to derive them from foundational beliefs. However, after reading his thoughts on the concept of value, many individuals may find it highly conflicting and somewhat self-contradictory. This can lead to a troubling question lingering in their minds: what exactly was Nietzsche trying to convey about *'positive values'?* Does it question the validity of fundamental issues like religiously discerned or defined righteousness or wrongfulness? Nietzsche believed that values are essential for human existence, but since no absolute values exist, their evolution on earth must be measured in other ways.[1-6,8,9] Humans and other value-positing agents create values as aids for survival and growth, and belief in them is essential to our well-being. However, people often forget that values are their creations and live as if they are absolute. As per Nietzsche, life neither possesses nor lacks intrinsic value and yet is constantly being evaluated; such evaluations can usefully be read as symptoms of the condition of the evaluator. Those evaluations done by one individual for another individual may not depict a correct or accurate picture. Social institutions enforcing adherence to inherited values can create self-serving economies of power, but if these values are no longer suitable, they can become a disadvantage. Humans must reactivate their creative, value-positing capacities and construct new values in these cases. Nietzsche's scrutiny of the validity of God's existence and the notion of divinity stirred up quite a commotion in both the scholarly and general communities. Some individuals yearn to be subordinate to a superior force that can offer solutions, alleviate their distress, or heal their wounds. He talked about *"the death of God,"* which many people saw as a potential threat to traditional religion and metaphysics. Some people who interpret Nietzsche's work think that he adored and preached nihilism, rejected philosophical reasoning, and focused on exploring the human condition through literature without caring about gaining truth and knowledge in the usual way. However, others who interpret Nietzsche's work believe

he was trying to counteract the predicted rise of nihilism and had a positive plan to reaffirm life.[1,2,4-6] They say he wanted people to radically rethink the nature of human existence, knowledge, and morality from a naturalistic perspective and override the age-old traditionalistic and untested dogma and doctrines, no matter how those things are sacrosanct or religiously invaluable. Regardless of one's interpretation, Nietzsche suggested that people should work to *"become what one is"* by cultivating their instincts and cognitive abilities, not blatantly accepting words treated as 'undeniably obligatory'. This plan requires constant effort to overcome psychological and intellectual limitations that we inherit from our past. Nietzsche's works emphasised the significance of self-discovery in shaping one's identity, without depending on external factors like God or a soul. This way of life must be wholeheartedly embraced, even in the face of the daunting concept of "eternal recurrence," where all events are supposed to be repetitive or reoccurring. Some individuals attribute a cosmological "will to power" theory to Nietzsche. However, others argue that he was not particularly interested in creating a general cosmology. He had a keen interest in analysing and evaluating the fundamental cultural values of Western philosophy, religion, and morality, which he referred to as expressions of the *ascetic ideal*.[1,2] The *ascetic ideal* is rooted in the belief that *suffering holds ultimate significance.* According to him, the Judeo-Christian tradition interpreted suffering as God's will and an opportunity for atonement, making it more bearable. Christianity's success, in turn, was primarily due to its flattering doctrine of personal immortality, which emphasized the cosmic importance of each individual's life and death. Similarly, traditional philosophy favoured the soul over the body, the mind over the senses, duty over desire, reality over appearance, and the timeless over the temporal. While Christianity promised salvation to those who repented, philosophy offered its sages a secular form of salvation. The common underlying assumption was that existence required explanation, justification, or expiation and that experience was inferior to some other "true" world. Both religion and philosophy may be viewed as symptoms of a life in decline or distress.[1,2,4-6, 12-14]

Mental Illness and Societal Reactions: Views of Nietzsche

Nietzsche's ideology has often been deemed as obscure and difficult to apply to understand the tenets of health, illness, wellness and well-being. His unique perspective on psychological conditions differs from contemporary theories such as Freudian psychoanalysis and early behaviourism. According to him, society frequently fails to acknowledge the exceptional creativity and subtleties of individuals with unconventional aesthetics, often labelling them as unorthodox or non-conformist. Eventually, society may even consider such individuals as morbid or pathological. He believed that geniuses possess extraordinary abilities and visions that stem from their creative soul, making them rebels and provocateurs who seek to dismantle established but essentially moribund truths and beliefs. Unfortunately, the person's external appearance and behaviour are often viewed as strange by their social environment. He regarded these individuals as "untimely" and "born posthumously," because their foresightedness, remaining ahead of the time and their intricate ability to influence generations after generations. Their brilliance is valued by future generations, not by their contemporaries. Society struggles to understand the fundamental ideas of these individuals due to an excessive focus on routinized, mundane and predictable societal standards and concepts.[3] It is impossible to fully grasp the evolution of philosophy, theology, and psychology in the 20th Century without acknowledging Nietzsche's profound influence. Philosophers and mental health thinkers like Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, Jean Paul Satre and Michel Foucault had used his ideas to develop their own constructs on explaining psychological issues. The movements of existentialism and deconstruction, which have shaped philosophy and literary criticism, owe a significant debt to Nietzsche. Diverging from the typical approach of philosophers, Nietzsche communicated through emotion like artists. Profound agony and anguish is the core of his message and the driving forces for creation of new ideas. Physical and psychological struggles marked Friedrich Nietzsche's life. From a young age, he was

plagued by debilitating migraines and in the later phase of life he had 'psychotic breakdown'. In addition to his health issues, Nietzsche also faced social isolation and a lack of recognition during his lifetime. He rejected the common belief that health is solely based on the efficient functioning of physical and mental processes for survival. Instead, he proposed a more positive concept of health that emphasized the importance of thriving and fulfilling potential, knowing one's meaning of life, ability to recognize that what may be detrimental to one person's health may not be the same for another.[4] According to him, being healthy means meeting the demands that our deepest motivations place upon us. He challenged traditional views of health, particularly the concept of "normality." He rejected the idea that normality is a state of stability or balance in the body's internal systems. Instead, Nietzsche emphasized the importance of inner turmoil as a fundamental aspect of psychobiological function and it has the potential positive impact on all aspects of human psyche. Unlike evolutionary biologists who focus on "fitness," he believed that the ultimate goal of the organism is maximal adaptation through a constant struggle towards an undefined and unattainable ideal. For him, this struggle is the essence of health.[5] The process of evaluating individuals as normal or abnormal has contributed to narratives of health and illness, according to Nietzsche. He thought that life doesn't have an inherent worth, but it's always being judged. So, he considered these judgments to reflect the judge's state of mind rather than the person being judged. As per Nietzsche, the cultural values espoused by society, religion, and morality have a deeper impact on people's notion of health. He referred to those elements as expressions of the ascetic ideal. The ascetic ideal emerges when suffering is given ultimate significance. Mainstream society always negates elements of unorthodoxy and newness by using a strong evaluative process, ultimately leading to alienation as morbid or unhealthy.[6]

The quest for linking psychological morbidity and unorthodoxy or creative brilliance or social non-conformity is not new. The connection between psychological morbidity and creative brilliance had been endorsed by Plato as "divine madness" (theia mania) which he described as a source of inspiration for producing and adding new constructs. Karl Popper stated that the quest for adding new elements into the existing literature has often been held as an "irrational element".[7] Famous 19th Century French mathematician Henri Poincaré, also gave utmost importance to intuition over logic by saying: "It is by logic that one proves, but it is by intuition that one invents".[3,8,9] Andreasen[10,11] also found the association between 'creative novelty' and 'bipolar affective disorder'. Andreasen[10] noted that factors like acquisition of knowledge and skill, ambition, determination, discipline and hard work were associated with creative persons like 'authors' with the history of bipolar disorder. According to Andreasen,[11] the brain's creative process begins by disrupting its usual order. Nietzsche believed that creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin, as one act of creation may destroy something else. He argued that a truly exceptional human being must forge their own identity through self-discovery, without relying on anything beyond this life, like God or a soul.[1,2] His major contribution was questioning the structural and dogmatic views of morality prevailing in 19th Century Europe.

In his work, "On the Genealogy of Morality," he extensively explored traditional views on morality and their effects on human psychological development and potential impact on psychological faculties of human beings. He identified two dominant ethical assessment patterns used by the traditionalistic society, viz., a) "good/bad" and b) "good/evil". These two ethical assessment patterns are used by the society to evaluate individuals. Nietzsche argued that the *"good/bad"* pattern originates from social class privilege or society's process of assessing people through the prism of social attributes like 'class', 'legacy', 'aristocracy', and most importantly the decisively dominant elitist views of the society. This pattern associates goodness with exclusive virtues and gives rise to a *"noble morality"*, expressing the superiority of those in the elite class. On the other hand, the *"good/evil pattern"* focuses on altruistic concern for the welfare of others and has universalistic pretensions, promoting fundamental human equality and equal moral consideration for all.[1,2]

Influential individuals in society often oppress nonconformists. Those nonconformists may need to be in a better position to seek justice from society. Eventually, those people may develop a deep-seated resentment towards their oppressors. According to Nietzsche, this emotional pattern can lead to the creation of a new moral concept of evil. This concept is designed to condemn the actions of those who have caused harm to the oppressed. The degree to which this process is intentional or subconscious is a matter of debate among scholars. Over time, the negation of the concept of evil can give rise to a new idea of goodness rooted in a desire to prevent harmful actions. He stated that morality amounts to a vindictive effort to poison the happiness of the fortunate, instead of a high-minded, dispassionate, and strictly rational concern for others. According to him, societies that are steeped in tradition often treat those who exhibit non-conformity with disdain due to their unconventional traits and ways of thinking. Such societies do this by making individuals feel guilty for their supposed moral failings. Nietzsche believed that this notion of guilt developed through a transfer of the structure that associates loss with punishment from the realm of material debt to a broader category of actions that violate social norms. The real transformation, however, lies in the purification and internalization of indebtedness. This links the demand for compensation to a wrongful action that the individual should be able to control. As a result, the condemnation of the violation attaches a negative judgment to the individual's sense of personal worth.[1,2,12,13]

CONCLUSION

Many view Nietzsche as a philosopher with a naturalist perspective, seeking to uncover reality's mysteries through scientific means. However, while Nietzsche did acknowledge the importance of scientific thinking, he also rejected the notion that knowledge could be reduced solely to the findings of science. Instead, he believed that nature's chaotic and unpredictable elements, including animal instincts, should be factored into philosophical thought. Nietzsche's focus on "natural life" meant recognizing that human interests and understanding are not always given precedence in our world.

REFERENCES

1. Nietzsche F. Mixed opinions and maxims. In W. Kaufmann (Ed. & Trans.), The portable Nietzsche (pp. 64–67). New York: Penguin Books. 1976. (Original work published 1879)
2. Nietzsche F. The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), New York: Vintage. 1967 (Original work published 1872).
3. Cybulska EM. (2019). Nietzsche: Bipolar Disorder and Creativity. Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology 2019;19:51-63.
4. Berry J. Nietzsche and the ancient skeptical tradition. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011.
5. Podolsky SH, Tauber AI. Nietzsche's Conception of Health: The Idealization of Struggle. In: Babich, B.E. (eds) Nietzsche, Epistemology, and Philosophy of Science. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol 204. Springer, Dordrecht. 1999.
6. Hales SD, Welshon R. Nietzsche, Perspectivism, & Mental Health. Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology. 1999;6(3):173-7.
7. Popper K. The logic of scientific discovery (2nd ed.). London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge Classics. 2005. (Original work published 1959).
8. Roberts M. Facilitating recovery by making sense of suffering: a Nietzschean perspective. Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing 2008;15:743-8.

9. Roberts M. Modernity, mental illness and the crisis of meaning. J Psychiatr Ment Health Nurs. 2007;14:277-81.

10. Andreasen NC. Creativity and mental illness: prevalence rates in writers and their first-degree relatives. Am J Psychiatry. 1987; 144: 1288-92.

11. Andreasen NC. The creative brain: The science of genius. New York, NY: Penguin Group. 2005.

12. Hatab LJ. Nietzsche on Sickness and Health. The Agonist. 2021;15(1):15-24.

13. Acampora C. Contesting Nietzsche, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2013.

14. Pfeffer R. Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche's Philosophy. The Review of Metaphysics. 1965;19:276–300.