

# Vairāgya – The Nietzschean Nihilism



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## Introduction

A few weeks ago, a young friend asked me a question about *vairāgya*, a somewhat obscure Hindu word, usually translated as ‘nonattachment’ or ‘renunciation’. He had previously read a post in a social media in which *vairāgya* was translated (by the great Indian sage Sri Aurobindo) as the “disgust that awakens a thirst for the eternal”. He was wondering how that ‘disgust’ differed from ordinary disgust and asking how a thirst for the eternal could arise from a disgust.

I thought his question was rather profound and poignant, especially in light of the fact that he had been examining what the “dark night of the soul” experientially entailed. Today humanity is going through the collective dark night of the soul without any certainty of a new dawn. The conception of *vairāgya*, as translated as ‘disgust’, can be examined from this perspective—the perspective of the dark night of the soul, which Friedrich Nietzsche called ‘Nihilism’.

What is it that initiates the *vairāgya*, disgust, dark night of the soul, or nihilism? What is it that liberates us therefrom? Nietzsche had a definitive insight that is relevant and applicable to us contemporary humans who live in the 21st century.

Nietzsche's path, and therefore our path, is different from the mystical path of the 16th-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross who entitled one of his poems "Dark Night of the Soul (La noche oscura del alma)" from which the idea of the "dark night of the soul" originates. Our path is not the mystical path of revelation but the rational path of understanding.

## Vairāgya – The Nietzschean Nihilism

**Question:** I read a post a while ago about *vairāgya*, a 'disgust' with the world that awakens a thirst for the eternal (a quote from Sri Aurobindo). For a few weeks now, I have been mulling over in my mind as to how a thirst for the eternal manifest itself from a disgust, as opposed to just disgust?

**Answer:** The Sanskrit etymology indicates that the term 'vairāgya' is an abstract noun derived from the word 'virāga', joining 'vi' meaning "without" with 'rāga' meaning "passion, feeling, emotion, or interest". A regular translation of *vairāgya* is "renunciation" or "nonattachment", which the modern Indian sage Sri Aurobindo insightfully translated as 'disgust'.

Vairāgya connotes the psychological awakening from our culturally mimetic ego-logical preoccupations. Vairāgya signifies the renunciation of the delusional semi-dreamlike world of ego-logical preoccupations for the world of Awareness—of fully conscious partaking and enjoying of Reality without attachment.

Let us look at Vairāgya as a class of disgust by way of an analogy. A sweet dream is no different from a nightmarish dream in so far as it is the same dream state. Suppose you experience a disgust while having a nightmare, you would want to switch it to a sweet dream where the disgust is replaced by a pleasurable experience which you would relish.

The same happens in your so-called "waking" (in fact only a semi-waking) state. When you experience nightmarish suffering, you want a relief, a salvation, from that suffering. You feel a disgust toward the life of suffering and seek instead an experience of pleasure but still on the same level of semi-awake or sub-awake dreamlike consciousness in which suffering is bound to happen. You would not feel a disgust if you had pleasurable experiences, but that would not last long.

Vairāgya, as the "disgust with the world that awakens a thirst for the eternal", is the disgust not only of the nightmare, but also of the sweet dream, that is, it is the disgust, aversion, toward the dream state as such. In one sense, it is similar to the "nausea" which Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea (La Nausée)*, experienced against the existential condition, insofar as his "nausea" is not specific to any particular existential situation, albeit initially, but the existential condition as such.

However, it is Friedrich Nietzsche who understands and captures the deepest essence of Vairāgya in the most comprehensive manner. Vairāgya begins with the psychological 'dis-ease' arising from a profound cognitive dissonance that cannot be tamed or subdued into a fallacious cognitive consonance. Nietzsche's designation of Vairāgya is "Nihilism".

In *NIHILISM* (the Chapter II of the First Book of *THE WILL TO POWER*), Nietzsche describes three kinds of Nihilism as psychological states and explicates three consecutive stages of emancipation therefrom through three radical liberational insights. Let me quote the pertinent sections (translation by Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale):

12 (A)

Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached, *first*, when we have sought a “meaning” in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long *waste* of strength, the agony of the “in vain,” insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure—being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had *deceived* oneself all too long.— This meaning could have been: the “fulfillment” of some highest ethical canon in all events, the moral world order; or the growth of love and harmony in the intercourse of beings; or the gradual approximation of a state of universal happiness; or even the development toward a state of universal annihilation—any goal at least constitutes some meaning. What all these notions have in common is that something is to be *achieved* through the process—and now one realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*.— Thus, disappointment regarding an alleged aim of becoming as a cause of nihilism: whether regarding a specific aim or, universalized, the realization that all previous hypotheses about aims that concern the whole “evolution” are inadequate (man no longer the collaborator, let alone the center, of becoming).

Nihilism as a psychological state is reached, *secondly*, when one has posited a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events, and underneath all events, and a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration (—if the soul be that of a logician, complete consistency and real dialectic are quite sufficient to reconcile it to everything). Some sort of unity, some form of “monism”: this faith suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity.— “The well-being of the universal demands the devotion of the individual” —but behold, there is no such universal! At bottom, man has lost the faith in his own value when no infinitely valuable whole works through him; i.e., he conceived such a whole in order *to be able to believe in his own value*.

Nihilism as psychological state has yet a *third* and *last* form. Given these two insights, that becoming has no goal and that underneath all becoming there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself completely as in an element of supreme value, an escape remains: to pass sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and to invent a world beyond it, a *true* world. But as soon as man finds out how that world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities — but cannot *endure this world though one does not want to deny it*.

What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of “aim,” the

concept of “unity,” or the concept of “truth.” Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not “true,” is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world. Briefly: the categories “aim,” “unity,” “being” which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*.

12 (B)

Suppose we realize how the world may no longer be interpreted in terms of these three categories, and that the world begins to become valueless for us after this insight: then we have to ask about the sources of our faith in these three categories. Let us try if it is not possible to give up our faith in them. Once we have devaluated these three categories, the demonstration that they cannot be applied to the universe is no longer any reason for devaluating the universe.

Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*.

Final conclusion: All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves and which then proved inapplicable and therefore devaluated the world—all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination—and they have been falsely *projected* into the essence of things. What we find here is still the *hyperbolic naivete* of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things.

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What is a *belief*? How does it originate? Every belief is a considering-something-true.

The most extreme form of nihilism would be the view that every belief, *every* considering-something-true, is necessarily false because there simply is no *true world*. Thus: a *perspectival appearance* whose origin lies in us (in so far as we continually *need* a narrower, abbreviated, simplified world),

—That it is the measure of strength to what extent we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely *apparent* character, the necessity of lies.

To this extent, nihilism, as the denial of a truthful world, of being, might be a *divine way of thinking*.

Nihilism, as a psychological state (which Nietzsche calls “pathological transitional stage”), is the radical belief- and believing-annihilating disillusionment. What we think and how we think what we think are programmed into our mind. The abecedarian conceptual categories of thought, such as meaning, value, aim or purpose, unity, and truth, that order our thinking and mold our behavior, are externally installed and unconsciously internalized. Therefore: “The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*.” In other words, we humans are confined in the mode of *believing* when we *think* we think, and are enclosed within our *belief* when we *understand* we understand the world.

Believing is *modeling of reality*, while belief is *model of reality*. Both are externally set and internally fixed. Both are mimetically acquired and recreated, and are designed to impede the natural, creative, and free movement of human cogitation (thinking) and cognition (knowing).

Believing is the mimetic, universally paradigmatic, cognitive-cogitative operating system, while belief is the mimetic, culturally paradigmatic, reality-conjuring narrative program. Believing impedes the natural evolution of the potential of human cognition and cogitation, while belief begets conceptual perversion, breeds perceptual illusion, and produces false notions about reality and the world. Our ego-logical self, our faux ego, is the avatar placed as the subject in the projected world of make-believe constructed by the mental operating system of believing. Our faux ego is a figment of belief. Our faux conceptual categories of values—such as aim, unity, and truth—are figments of belief.

Nihilism is the profound belief-annihilating cognitive dissonance (*vairāgya/disgust*) which the faux ego experiences in the Real Self's Realization of the fallacy of believing as such in the categories of meaning or purpose, unity or oneness, and truth or true world. Nihilism is the self-recognition of the collapse of the edifice of believing and belief—of “The Matrix” of illusion, delusion, and collusion, within and without (*vairāgya/renunciation*). If you can endure all three stages of Nihilistic Crisis to the end—i.e., to the cessation (*nirvāṇa*) of Nihilism, you will be able to see aright Reality with the Eye of the I and to think freely your original thought with the I of the Mind.

You ask: “how a thirst for the eternal manifest itself from a disgust?” Now this “thirst for the eternal” can be another, subtler, ego-logical preoccupation, an ego trip as well as an ego trap!

As stated in the second paragraph of 12 (A): “Some sort of unity, some form of ‘monism’ [‘universal oneness with the eternal or the divine’]: this faith suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity.” Hence, this sentence is followed by: “The well-being of the universal demands the devotion of the individual”—but behold, there is no such universal! At bottom, man has lost the faith in his own value when no infinitely valuable whole works through him; i.e., he conceived such a whole in order to be able to believe in his own value.

This “thirst for the eternal” can also be genuine and authentic. It is a thirst for the real in disgust of the illusory. It is a thirst for the substantial in disgust of the phantom. Therefore, “nihilism, as the denial of a truthful world [so-believed], of being [so-believed], might be a divine [conatively fully human] way of thinking.

Here I am using “conative” instead of “authentic” because “the Will to Power” is Nietzsche’s translation of the concept of the Conatus—that power which causes a thing to persist in being itself—that power or will with which everything in Nature endeavors to persist in its own being. It is “Nature’s God” in *The Declaration of Independence*, where Nature is taken as a whole. The Conatus, “Nature’s God”, “the Will to Power”, is the evolutionary impulse, the syntropic thrust for self-optimization, seen in Nature and all things in Nature, because to be is to become and to become is to grow as a whole.

*Vairāgya*, a disgust or nausea that rouses a thirst for the eternal, for the real, is the total disillusionment with one’s own inauthenticity and errancy, unconatively seeking to attain self-worth in a place wherein the authentic self is categorically absent. It is the disillusionment with the utter futility of unceasing faux ego-logical preoccupations and of searching for meaning, aim, value, truth, and (ultimately) self-worth in

the world of fallacious beliefs, of illusion, delusion, and collusion, effected by believing and belief wherein we can never find the real or the eternal.

Furthermore, psychologically, believing and having a belief structurally assume the existence of external authority. You believe in your external authority and you have a belief provided to you by your external authority, be it "God" or "guru" or "state" or "society". You are dependent and unfree, psychologically and ideationally. This psychological structure is also that of victim consciousness ("human constructs of domination"), and hence you are self-admittedly psychologically and characterologically weak.

Vairāgya as disgust is thus also a disgust toward your own weakness. Therefore, "That it is the measure of strength to what extent we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely apparent character, the necessity of lies." In the crisis of nihilism, you are all alone in the universe. Your external authority is collapsing internally, and you have nowhere or nobody to which or to whom to turn. Thus, to endure the whole process of a nihilistic crisis requires a tremendous mental, emotional, and spiritual strength.

Elsewhere, you asked me about the top-down approach vs. the bottom-up approach. You need to come to this point of the Nietzschean Nihilism on your own (bottom-up) in order for a teacher (top-down) can be of any assistance. The bottom-up is the necessary condition (you must come to the point of nihilism) and it can also be a necessary and sufficient condition if you have a sufficient degree of strength. Nietzsche is a great example. The top-down, by itself, can be a sufficient condition but never a necessary and sufficient condition.

A teacher, even if authentic, cannot help a student who does not have the minimum requisite strength of character. Otherwise, the teacher is inevitably made into the student's external authority. If the teacher is inauthentic, a "false guru" (of which there are many), the student can never go through the second stage of nihilism. Therefore, if you cannot relate to your teacher as a sovereign, independent, freethinking, and autonomous individual, without holding your teacher as an external authority, then you will fall into the same external authority psychological structure: "a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration."

Therefore, as I wrote in "Self-Responsibility, Self-Integrity, and Freedom from the Guru", paradoxical though it may sound, an authentic guru can help only those who do not need a guru. That is, the guru provides only for the students who provide for themselves.

In each of the three Nihilistic Crises, the faux ego along with its illusory world faces death. If the real ego, or the authentic self, with the real world is not simultaneously aborning, then the faux ego will resurrect, that is, redream, with heightened cleverness and more sophisticated belief, or the host (the body-mind of the real self) will commit suicide. The three stages of the Nietzschean Nihilistic Crisis are, therefore, three stages of the faux ego's death and of the real ego's birth.

If we equate Vairāgya with Nietzschean Nihilism, then there are three stages of disgust and renunciation. You come to experience Freedom that is Becoming wherein the Present is the Eternal and the Eternal is the Present. If the disgust is only of the faux ego, then there is no renunciation. It is when the origination of the disgust is coextensive with the conative power of renunciation that the Crisis of Nihilism becomes the Blessing of Freedom.