

Taylor Adkins

In book I, section 23 of *Gay Science*, Nietzsche deploys a theory concerning the rise of the individual in relation to the *signs of corruption* in a society. This corruption signifies for Nietzsche the development and culmination of superstition in a culture. Superstition in this text is equated with the “second-order free spirit.” Unlike the religious advocate, the superstitious is always *more of a person*, meaning that the appearance of this attribute is the development of the *progress* of the intellect in its movement of becoming more independent; thus superstition is the delight and celebration of the cultivation of individuality and individuals. Similar to his attacks on “the good” in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche reminds us that the term “corruption”—which here, as elsewhere, appears as a *positive condition* (for the growth of ‘riper’ individuals no less)—actually stems from a value judgment made by the religious status quo against the rise of superstition. In this sense, Nietzsche strikes against the reactionary (can we say, re-reacts?) and affirms that, on the contrary, this development of superstition is “actually a symptom of *enlightenment*.” Superstition and corruption become here the means by which morality, its means of capture and containment, its stratification of the individual, and its disciplinary ‘No’ of auto- and trans-policing all lose their primacy in governing and guiding the actions of the individual, which, to follow Nietzsche, we will interpret as the inevitable symptom of the decline of the legislative and repressive power of the collective over the individual.

It follows from this that the development of superstition points towards the *exhaustion* of a culture. And again, Nietzsche is quick to assert and make clear that this seemingly negative term actually creates something positive in its proliferation throughout a culture. After expending its energy on war and losing its pleasure in such endeavors, an exhausted society will experience a shift in the deployment of its energy moving away from the engagement in warfare toward “more private passions [that] merely become less visible.” Now the individual has more resources and energy to squander—something Nietzsche claims could not have happened previously because the individual “simply was not yet rich enough.” Yet this cultivation of the individual’s energy into private affairs leads to truly great events: great love, great hatred, and the “flame of knowledge” flourish, which leads to a paradox. The *exhaustion* of the society is the potential *impetus* for the augmentation and actualization of new arrangements of aesthetic, scientific, and ethical projects. Put another way, when a society experiences exhaustion the individual *explodes and overflows* with so much potential energy that the genesis of the individual comes onto the scene blessed with the gift of *squandering* more resources than would have been wise or advisable during times of *danger* and war.

Yes, Nietzsche admires war and danger because it forces the instincts to develop in strength: it forces weaknesses and failures to be culled from life, which is itself the *movement of life in its immanent trajectory*. But, here at least, Nietzsche offers some resistance to his usual claim of promoting war, for it is *after* the war that we see a sort of hypertrophy of strength in its deployment in the individual. These movements are thus inversely proportionate: as the society becomes more and more exhausted in its endeavor, the individual ripens and becomes filled with

the capacity to concentrate on the augmentation of its own power. We can now contextualize one of Nietzsche's aphorisms that is always misquoted and—even if it is quoted in full—usually misunderstood because of its terseness: “*From life's school of war—What does not kill me makes me stronger*” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “Maxims and Arrows,” 8).