

HUMAN MELANCHOLIA

Luis Trevino

Honors Thesis

Southern Illinois University – Carbondale

May 10, 2017

## Contents

Part I. Illustration of the Human Predicament	3
Part II. Nietzsche on the Soul	16
Part III. The Dichotomous Responses to Melancholia	31
Bibliography	39
Acknowledgements	41

## Illustrations

(1) Albrecht Durer, <i>Melencolia I</i>	15
(2) Jan Matejko, <i>Stanczyk</i>	30
(3) Frans Francken the Younger, <i>Mankind's Eternal Dilemma: The Choice between Virtue and Vice</i>	38

## Illustration of the Human Predicament

It was in 1758 that the Swedish botanist Carl Von Linne first coined the phrase *Homo sapien*—from the Latin meaning “wise man”—as a taxonomic classification in reference to a member of the human species. More commonly used in the general population, though, terms such as “human being” or just “human” have been predominantly used to specifically refer to and distinguish the *Homo sapien* from the rest of nature. And which distinguishing characteristic other than the degree to which humans exhibit the phenomenon called “consciousness” is more evident when analyzing distinctions uniquely held by human beings. Moreover, though we may not be able to claim with completely certain confidence that only human beings are unique observers of this phenomenon among the totality of nature, we may nonetheless at least soundly claim that the extent to which human consciousness reaches has far surpassed that of all other known species. This augmented consciousness, then, which most distinguishes the human species, might be argued to predominantly affect human beings in fundamentally dualistic ways. On the one hand, we wish for knowledge and seek to benefit from its contribution to the truths concerning our existence, but on the other, we are driven to take comfort in ignorance, and imagination, and shrink back from the potential development that could result from accepting the uncomfortable pricks of truth.

For it is precisely because of the superior extent of their consciousness that human beings are able to ponder the grand complexities characteristic of their immediate condition in existence and to contemplate the vastness of potential hypotheses concerning their existential positioning in comparison with the rest of

nature. Whereas the rest of nature remains bound to the laws of the physical world in their relatively shallow perception of existence, the *Homo sapien* alone holds the inherent ability to consider the abundance of facts and opinions concerning topics such as the finiteness of their own natural organisms, and also things like the most proper or best ultimate ends for them (i.e. death and ethics). Additionally, popular belief throughout humanity has held that humans should indeed continue to be classified as “wiser” beings, on account of their more profoundly inherent rationality, i.e. their “superior” consciousness, as well as their distinctive insight into realms of deeper knowledge and understanding concerning the natural world.

Thus, as it is evident that human beings are perceived to possess an inherent level of complexity within them, I move now to introduce a distinction between the “spheres” of existence which accurately characterize the actual present condition of the *Homo sapien*, especially when placed in juxtaposition with the rest of nature. I make a distinction between two separate spheres: that of the “human condition” and that of the “existential predicament.” The former referring to the sphere human beings share along with the rest of nature, and the latter referring to the sphere made possible because of their deeper consciousness. Finally, the *Homo sapien* is fundamentally defined in all of their complexity through the synthesis of these various spheres of human experience and understanding, the former being reached only internally and the latter externally. The “wisdom” in their psyche is ultimately defined by their ability to participate in complex contemplation regarding the most fundamental questions concerning existence.

Furthermore, let us inquire into this proposed division of the *Homo sapien's* present condition by creating a juxtaposition of these two spheres of existence and contrasting them according to fundamentally distinct ways in which they address some of the most crucial questions concerning human existence. The first question I propose, then, to begin our analysis relates to the concept of "origin." Indeed, when analyzed according to the human condition, we ask: "where did we come from?" The answer to this question, then, arises from the open world and lays itself unto the human psyche in simple and intelligible ways. We are aware of our natural physical bodies and recognize their cause to be the prior acts of procreation of those immediately preceding us within our species, and we base our belief in these causes according to the information steadily presented to our faculty of reason over the course of time. Thus, we feel satisfied in recognizing the cause of our current human condition and we learn to adapt to the convergent but infinitely increasing degree of accumulated knowledge regarding our physical universe and our individual human position in it. Conversely, when analyzed according to the existential predicament of humanity, the answer to this question is not at all understood. Here, we find ourselves puzzled in our contemplation over the cause of our being because we ask from our conscious point of view: "What is the *cause* or *reason* for my existence?" To this question, we find no sort of sound rational explanation neither anywhere in the totality of the open world, nor in the privately perceived depths within our internal minds. No matter how much longing or what kind of justification we might have for realizing an answer, the answer is in no way presented to us naturally. We then

identify our place in the universe only to realize its seemingly utter lack of dependence on the human condition, and we continue on in perpetual ignorance about the true essence of the human mind. Ultimately, from the point of view of the existential predicament, the origin—those first or purposeful causes—of existence have no answer but that of ignorant human unintelligibility in the face of such a question. If we may finally be honest from our more comfortable distance from the past, we must admit that the wisest human, whom stated to know nothing about anything, was speaking a universal truth extendable to all of us.<sup>1</sup>

Now, I move to another critical question of the human experience: “what is the fundamental nature of the phenomenon of time?” With regards to the human condition, time is understood in terms of duration. More specifically, we have come to understand (through the invention of the calendar) the relative duration of ordered periods such as years, months, days, etc., and use them to comprehend the lengths of time experienced in the natural world. The various actual problems of the present, then, as they are experienced in terms of finite moments of experience and temporary duration, may assuredly be extinguished by the passage of time. Also, because of whatever unidentified phenomenon related to human consciousness, time is experienced differently at different times from an individual point of view—signaling a comprehension of time specifically relative to the human condition. From the existential predicament, however, time becomes much harder to first-handedly keep track of, or even adequately comprehend, as rationally as it is

---

1. Greek philosopher Socrates (470 B.C. – 399 B. C.)

understood in relation to the human condition. Incidentally, the existential predicament also brings with it a justifiable anxiety as it provides the intelligible realization that all of the time prescribed to any individual human being, and even to the entire history of all of humanity's origin on Earth, could or has ever experienced is ultimately miniscule in comparison to the immensely long duration of the universe. Moreover, though it appears, (especially in optimistic lighting) that the human progress which is continually developed via thinking, pondering, hypothesizing, etc., is indeed progress in our abstract understanding of the conceptual significance of time, there has yet to be any answers actually discovered concerning its essential meaning or relation to the present moment throughout the entirety of human existence.

From the point of view of the individual psyche, time retains the extraordinary force of certain and constant change, seemingly endless in its continuation and without a beginning in knowable identification. Indeed, further bewilderment overtakes the individual's internal mind as its contemplation might realistically lead it to imagine a past where the massive passage of time had not yet allowed for the development of its very being, and also to ponder the possibility of a future without it. Through our consciousness, we are revealed the fundamental reality that our humanity defines our finite duration in physical existence, unlike what is perceived of the universe which apparently possesses no finite end. Ultimately, the existential predicament leaves the *Homo sapien* to respond to the



question of the nature or essence of time with only a critically uncertain set of beliefs and ideas.

Thirdly, I posit one more corpulent question to consider, but simply state it as: “What should we do?” or “Where are we going?” In other words, questions concerned with the *purpose* and *ultimate ends* of human beings. Inevitably, through the phenomenon of human consciousness, human beings have been led to consider a plethora of possibilities about the most proper ultimate ends of their existence, both as a whole and as individuals. Therefore, from the perspective of the human condition, we in a sense know what proper ends to pursue for our species, such as to encourage reproduction and maintain homeostasis. Additionally, through the continual advancement of human sophistication and dominance over nature—via scientific and technological advancement especially—we are further persuaded that each problem resultant from ignorance and related to the human condition, may potentially be solved through a rational response to whatever specific situation. For example, if we were to imagine a spectrum of human desires, related to the human condition, and originating from a lack of knowledge or experience so as to fulfill all from the most noble to the most base of desires, then we would be accurate in assuming a potential solution within reach of any individual with the will to act towards their achieving the fulfillment of whichever desire. The scholar is capable of fulfilling his capacity for distinguished specialization; the physical trainer of achieving a superior strength worthy of honor; the hedonist of finding flourishing streams of elongated pleasure throughout the majority of a lifetime; the narcissist of

reaching semi-divine fame and of successfully convincing others to continually emphasize their grandiosity. Thus, the human condition in itself inherently implies a grand stream of problems to overcome, broadly describable as physical, biological, economic, social, and much more. Though similar, this sphere of humanity's present stance is still distinctly different from the existential predicament in that there are at least some natural answers to the questions of the proper ultimate ends of humans. We have the empirical sciences, for example, to point towards the prescriptions made by nature, though for human beings specifically there may still be a degree of ambiguity to these prescriptions as is not the case for the other so-called irrational animals in nature.

Indeed, in the existential predicament facing humanity, the questions concerning the meaning and ultimate ends of existence are left unanswerable. Whereas the human condition is characterized by problems similarly encountered by nature in general, the existential predicament is characterized by a more unique problem which is not shared by the rest of nature: the problem of existence itself. In the search for meaning outside of the natural order of one's experience in the world, there is no known route to even begin uncovering rational answers. Nothing we could ever contemplate or accomplish could ever adequately address the question of existential meaning, and instead could at most provide a distraction from the angst of ignorance surrounding such a critical question concerning one's understanding of the core essence of their humanity. But while the causes for problems concerning the human condition are either known or may potentially be put under intellectual

investigation, the causes for the perceived predicament of existence are unable to be identified at all. Therefore, we are left incapable of forming any sort of response to the question of meaning or reason when pondering from our continual existential predicament.

Proceeding this analysis of the meeting between these distinct spheres in the characterization of the *Homo sapien*, I now propose to identify the union of them, i.e., the actually present and continual condition of human beings, as the “human predicament.” Referring back to the questions posed earlier, the human condition stands fundamentally characterized by a gladness sprouting from the potentialities of answers to critical questions, while the existential predicament is essentially described by a gloominess stemming from the limits of human enlightenment. Thus, I directly equate and associate the human predicament with “melancholia,” that is, as a composite of the human experience *essentially* characterized by an unchangeable state of melancholy.

Additionally, as the meaning of the feeling of melancholy itself is not as easily or directly explainable as that of other feelings, elaborating over its historical origins may serve to further illuminate the reason it is equitable to the human predicament. Tracing back to the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460-370 BCE), melancholy was originally associated with one of the four temperaments, which together described the differing but fundamental personality types found among the spectrum of human beings, according to the ancient concept of

humourism.<sup>2</sup> Humourism was a medical system which centrally argued that either excess or deficiency of any of the four “humors” (distinct bodily fluids) consequently influenced people’s temperaments to be represented in specific ways. Moreover, humourism posited that each individual person was composed of a unique idiosyncratic composition of each of the four humors, and that the melancholic personality or emotion was specifically a direct result of excessive black bile in a person.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the melancholic temperament was predominantly considered the most undesirable of the four humors to be inclined towards throughout most of ancient history. As early as the fourth century B.C., however, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was among the first of thinkers to connect the melancholic temperament to a potential for a higher frame of mind. But it was only until the Renaissance period, though, that popular opinion concerning the melancholic personality began to shift towards a more positive, and even admirable, lighting. Majorly due to the Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino’s (1433-1499) ideas—which were largely influenced by Plato—about how only the melancholic temperament was capable of leading a person to achieve great creative and intelligible heights, as well as because of the rush of cultural and artistic development of period, Renaissance thought influenced popular opinion about the

---

2. Benson, Nigel. *The Psychology Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained*, (New York: DK Publishing, 2012), 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

previously undesired melancholic temperament in such a way that it directly connected it to a typical trait of the personality of the creative genius.<sup>4</sup>

Henceforth, a great degree of fame was made disposable to great artistic figures still historically recognized today such as da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Durer, among others. And in Albrecht Durer's work specifically, among what are considered his master engravings, *Melencolia I* interestingly portrays Durer's conception of the phenomenon of melancholy as it defines the human predicament. Though the exact meaning and intentions of Durer's work may still be justifiably debated up to the present day, the picture itself serves as an illustration to further accurately outline the state of humankind.

Interestingly, it has been pointed out that Durer's illustration, in including the various objects associated with measurement and geometry, is meant to emphasize these fields of knowledge as they were especially associated with artistic creation and the melancholic temperament.<sup>5</sup> And though there may indeed be a multitude of valid interpretations regarding the main underlying significance of Durer's illustration, I emphasize a specific one here which especially corresponds to what we have identified as the human predicament. Furthermore, the being illustrated in Durer's work, though possessive of mostly human features, is also shown with a set of two large wings sprouting from its back. Thus, in being winged, it possesses the ability to progress from its current intellectual position, however it

---

4. Wittkower, Rudolph and Margot Wittkower. *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists*, (New York: Norton, 1969), 98-105.

5. National Gallery of Art. "*Melencolia I*," (National Gallery of Art, 2017).

is unable to fly in the sense that it is impotent in actually attaining any sort of knowledge beyond the realm of limited human understanding.<sup>6</sup> An inner despair, then, encompasses itself over the being in such a way that the melancholy characteristic of its existence leaves it unable to reach for deeper understanding about itself. Anguished because of the lack of Wisdom concerning its existential predicament and unable to be consoled by the progressing discoveries of its physical condition, the being in Durer's work curiously mirrors the very essence of the *Homo sapien* in the face of the human predicament. Science and mathematics, artistic creativity, philosophical pondering; all intellectual realms throughout humankind fall short in their attempt to provide rational reasons or meanings for the ultimate ends and purposes of human existence. Therefore, despite the blessing of seemingly limitless potential for intellectual expansion concerning its physical condition, Durer's being remains continually afflicted and accursed by the internal suffering of its endless ignorance about itself. Such is the state of the *Homo sapien* and the accurate illustration of the human predicament: like Durer's being, in continual search for higher Truth and Wisdom, but never capable of finding it; blessed with the seemingly invaluable gift of existence, yet accursed by the weight of a constant melancholia caused by the lack of answers to the most fundamental questions imaginable related to the wonder that is existence.

---

6. Ibid.



(1) Durer, Albrecht. *Melencolia I*, 1514.

## Nietzsche on the soul

“If you went in search of it, you would not find the boundaries of the soul, though you traveled every road-so deep is its measure [*Logos*]”

- Heraclitus (535 B.C.-475 B.C.)



To be confronted with the human predicament—which lies at the core of the *Homo sapien*'s existence—is an undeniable part of the human experience. Therefore, that there have been countless attitudes, ideas, responses, etc., suggested as the most viable to assume in the perpetual confrontation to melancholia should not come as a surprise when analyzing the succession of human history from a contemporary point of view. Among admired thinkers, then, some have exerted more strenuous efforts in diving into the depths of human consciousness in order to potentially uncover a most feasible solution to the human predicament. Thus, I move now to analyze one of these impactful thinkers specifically in order to further investigate the complexities surrounding the confrontation of the human predicament.

Furthermore, throughout the bulk of his writings, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) addressed a large variety of ideas, among which lay a specific insight into the core of human nature as well as how it is essentially determinative of how the human psyche should be adequately formed to address the human predicament. For that reason, I move now to elaborate over a selection of Nietzsche's ideas contained within his writings, which specifically relate to our illustration of the human predicament, and ultimately, to the best possible human response to confront it.

Thus, Nietzsche evidently fashioned himself a psychologist during his lifetime,<sup>7</sup> especially in the sense that he was a genuine investigator of and into the complexity of the human psyche. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, Nietzsche writes that “all psychology so far has been stuck in moral prejudices and fears; it has not ventured into the depths.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Nietzsche perceived that there was a shockingly large lack of information concerning the human psyche during his lifetime, (which would seem an especially sound proposition as formal psychological investigation was still in its primitive stages compared to today). Moreover, Nietzsche himself may also be characterized as a proponent of the conception similar to that of the ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus (535 BC – 475 BC), who posited that the mass of human beings lead such deliberately blinded and dreamlike lives that they are barely ever able to become aware of their actual human condition throughout the span of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, in *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche writes of the masses—those who choose to remain at the superficial and shallow levels of their psyche—describing how they are “passionately stretched out to the fantastic events portrayed in the theatre of politics, or how they strut about in a hundred masquerades, as youths,

---

7. Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*: “—The fact that from my writings there speaks a psychologist beyond compare, this is perhaps the first insight a good reader achieves—a reader such as I deserve, who reads me as good old philologists used to read their Horace,” (41).

8. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

9. Graham, Daniel W. *Heraclitus*, (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015).

men, greybeards, fathers, citizens, priests, officials, merchants, mindful solely of their collective comedy and not at all of themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche here characterizes humankind’s social occupations in general as a collective comedy, one which has resulted from the lack of desire for understanding about the deeper psyche. In addition, Nietzsche argues that without either a penetrating education of some kind or a shift in attitude in favor of truthfulness among the masses, the modern human being is continually destined to an inner distress and misery, anxiously concealed “through convention and masquerade, [and] art and religion.”<sup>11</sup> This irrationality, however, of the massive participants in the superficial constructs created by humankind is not manifested without justification. There are reasons indicated throughout Nietzsche’s writing for why the majority of humans would choose to live without an intentional investigation into the depths of the psyche, beyond the shallow and surface levels of the mind. For example, Nietzsche identifies the character trait of being independent as a rare thing to observe among the majority of human beings, since instead most people allow themselves to be persuaded by a “herd mentality,” (that is, a direct dependence on each other to determine behavior), and are especially convinced of continuing the trends enforced by this mentality whenever considering the implications of abandoning it, being the inevitability of exploration into the constructs of the self.

---

10. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Untimely Meditations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154-55.

11. *Ibid.*, 85.

Nietzsche further illustrates the circumstances of those who would deliberately submerge themselves beyond the artificial (and comfortable) layers of the psyche, writing:

“he enters a labyrinth, he multiplies by a thousand the dangers already inherent in the very act of living, not the least of which is the fact that no one with eyes will see how and where he gets lost and lonely and is torn limb from limb by some cave—Minotaur of conscience.”<sup>12</sup>

Ergo, Nietzsche is descriptive in emphasizing the potential for grand discomfort that could result from endeavoring past the shallowness of one’s psyche. And this could then be used to justify the majority of people’s disposition to abstain from this sort of endeavor, especially if it so seemingly appears unnecessarily burdensome to undertake. Indeed, even a degree of sympathy could be arguably due for the position the mass of people find themselves in: taking comfort in an intentional ignorance, manifested in the masquerade of life, and remaining wisely attuned at only the safest and most superficial levels of the mind. There is a great danger, however, in choosing to stay at only these lower levels, as Nietzsche incidentally points out. For without deeper exploration into the depths of one’s psyche, no person could ever be capable of achieving what Nietzsche conceived to be the highest possible human ideal: that of the “Schopenhauerean” man; the “heroic” human.

---

12. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30.

Nietzsche writes over what he terms as the “Schopenhauerean image of man,” and though named after German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who was a critical philosophical influence of Nietzsche’s throughout his life, the term has very little relation to Schopenhauer himself, and so may be independently attributed and interpreted as an ideal image of man according to Nietzsche. A most critical characteristic, then, which Nietzsche identifies in the Schopenhauerean man is that he “voluntarily takes upon himself the suffering involved in being truthful,” a suffering which gradually transforms his being and is ultimately “the real meaning of life to lead up to.”<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche here, in particularly identifying truthfulness in the exemplar human with an experienced suffering, apparently does so with the intention of simply describing a common state of being experienced by the truthful person. Nietzsche elaborates over this sufferable state correspondent to the Schopenhauerean person, writing that “the meaning of his activity is metaphysical, explicable through the laws of another and higher life...however much all that he does may appear to be destructive of the laws of this life and a crime against them...he will, to be sure, destroy his earthly happiness through his courage.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Nietzsche here means to emphasize a certain burden placed on the truthful individual which results from their overall unwillingness to conform to conventions or popular ideas in opposition to their sincere perception of the true human condition. Nietzsche is then led to state an

---

13. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Untimely Meditations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152.

14. *Ibid.*, 153.

inevitable conclusion that is strived after by the most truthful—to guide all actions towards an uninterrupted form of suffering.<sup>15</sup>

As if Nietzsche's portrayal of the Schopenhauerean man as an independent, truthful, suffering person had not been enough to discourage all but the terrifyingly eccentric of his time (and ours) to strive after this ideal, he further posits another poignant claim concerning this individual. "A happy life is impossible," Nietzsche writes:

"the highest that man can attain to is a heroic one. He leads it who, in whatever shape or form, struggles against great difficulties for something that is to the benefit of all and in the end is victorious, but who is ill-rewarded for it or not rewarded at all."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it is evident that Nietzsche ultimately maintained that the highest possible ideal human beings were able to attain had no strict relationship with the "imagined" life-goal of happiness. Instead, Nietzsche argued that the highest ideal, as it was exemplified by the Schopenhauerean man, was distinguished by a sort of heroic disposition towards existence.

To further realize the precise heroic notion that Nietzsche proposed to respond towards existence—and in our specific case the human predicament—it is useful to understand his main ideas about what essentially defined the heroic individual. Throughout his writings, Nietzsche identified a variety of traits

---

15. Nietzsche quotes Meister Eckhart: "The beast that bears you fastest to perfection is suffering," (Ibid., 153).

16. Ibid., 153-54.

fundamental to the heroic individual's personality, the first being that the heroic person is agreeably poised whenever presented with circumstances of solitariness. Specifically, Nietzsche addresses the concept of "greatness" and how it is able to be identified in a particular individual, stating that to be great means "being noble, wanting to be for yourself, the ability to be different, standing alone and needing to live by your own fists," and even goes further to claim that the "greatest of all is the one who can be the most solitary, the most hidden, the most different...the master of his virtues, the one with an abundance of will."<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is evident that Nietzsche upheld the notion that to be solitary becomes a necessary implication of the drive for greatness in an individual. To achieve a magnificent degree of nobility and authenticity in oneself, that is, to prescribe to the commandments of the heroic life, requires extended periods of lonesome development for the sake of the highest ideal.

Nietzsche further identifies another specific characteristic of the noble human being: that "egoism belongs to the essence of the noble soul."<sup>18</sup> In making this seemingly oxymoronic assertion, Nietzsche does not mean to claim that the heroic individual comports himself in a firmly self-interested attitude, but he does claim that due to the nature of the nobleness compiled by their way of being, that there is a kind of primordial superiority to their psyche. "The noble soul accepts this fact of its egoism," Nietzsche writes, "it admits to itself, under certain

---

17. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.

18. *Ibid.*, 162.

circumstances...that there are others with rights equal to its own... [moving] among these equals and “equally righted” with an assured modesty and a gentle reverence equal to how it treats itself.”<sup>19</sup> Thus it is clear that Nietzsche’s specific intention in identifying egoism as a character trait of heroic individuals is to express that they hold themselves up to an elevated self-reverence when dealing with themselves, which they then manifest in their comportment with others. That is to say, they hold themselves up towards life with a predominantly favorable attitude both internally to themselves and externally to others.

This sort of favorable attitude then extends to yet another of Nietzsche’s character traits he associated with the heroic disposition, which he described with the term “world-affirming.” Moreover, Nietzsche elsewhere writes of his heroic ideal, that is, “the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again just as it was and is through all eternity.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Nietzsche here is suggesting that nobleness entails a sort of extraordinary attitude towards the challenges presented by existence, where an individual not only maintains an ultimately hopeful and affirmative attitude in the face of any plethora of hardships, but they even take a step further and willingly embrace their struggles up to an infinite tally of these sufferable events.

---

19. *Ibid.*, 162.

20. *Ibid.*, 50.



To accomplish and maintain this sort of world-affirming disposition towards existence, then, is further related to a fourth character trait Nietzsche associates with the heroic human being in his writing. In *Ecco Homo*, Nietzsche writes of a particular period in his life when he underwent a threatening level of ill well-being. Nonetheless, though the experience was ultimately of direct threat to his vitality, he writes about it as a time when he was least persuaded to be a pessimist as “the instinct for self-recovery *forbade* me [Nietzsche] a philosophy of poverty and discouragement.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche identified an intrinsic sort of resiliency as an adequate trait corresponding to of the heroic disposition. Resiliency here, though, is not only intended to be applicable in situations involving physical distresses and ailments, as Nietzsche specifically faced himself. Rather, it is intended to mean more of a recurring habit of the heroic person: to exhibit an adaptable toughness when confronted with hardships associated with the unknown.

Finally, we come to a last character trait that Nietzsche associates with the heroic individual, one that is not only related the most to our previously analyzed traits, but is also of especially critical importance for anyone who would strive to lead the highest sort of life (according to Nietzsche). “*What is noble*,” Nietzsche asks in *The Will to Power*, “that one leaves happiness to the great majority...that one instinctively seeks heavy responsibilities...that one constantly contradicts the great majority not through words but through deeds.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Nietzsche frames the

---

21. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Ecce Homo*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

22. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *The Will to Power*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 498.

epitome of nobleness as one who would willingly undertake a sort of heavy burden of responsibility onto themselves for the sake of achieving the heroic lifestyle. In addition, to abandon the notion of happiness and lead a lifestyle in contradiction to popular or common opinion would also necessarily be directly challenging to any person who would attempt it (i.e., a burden to bear). Further in the same work, Nietzsche poses the question: “a great man...what is he?”—to which he compositely provides a set of answers stating, “there is a long logic in all of his activity... [he is able] to despise and reject everything petty about him,” as well as other things of this sort describing his nature as it was “invented in the grand style.”<sup>23</sup> In framing these specific burdens associated with the heroic individual, Nietzsche is keen to emphasize that these are ultimately tasks undertaken for the sake of the internal nobility of the individual. In other words, that the heroic human is in a fundamental way undertaking a specific kind of burden with the very choice of choosing to live in such a way. Solitariness, guided egoism, world-affirming capability, and resiliency—no matter the amount of suffering, struggles, and other sacrifices made to stay high up in the cold mountains—there is no doubt that Nietzsche’s ideal of the heroic human being is necessarily a task of tremendous pursuit, which may be acceptable considering it is his conception of the highest attainable life for human beings.

Up to this point in our discussion of Nietzsche’s “Schopenhauerian” or heroic individual, it has become clearer that this individual is the result of the organized

---

23. *Ibid.*, 505.

and natural formation of their guided actions in pursuit of a nobler (and higher) sort of existence. Thus, Nietzsche's writings contain references to a sort of internal mechanism of the human psyche, which he refers to as the "organizing idea." As Nietzsche posits that to maintain the strive towards the highest human ideal demands a collective effort from the entirety of one's consciousness, he describes how "meanwhile, in the depths, the organizing 'idea' with a calling to be master grows and grows—it begins to command, it slowly leads you *back* out of byways and detours, it prepares *individual* qualities and skills which will one day prove indispensable as means to the whole...it breathes a word about the dominant task, about 'goal', 'purpose', 'sense'."<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Nietzsche directly positions the organizing idea, that internal voice of the better in the midst of the unknown, as the ultimate variable of accomplishing the extraordinary feat of the highest attainable ideal.

Besides an organizing idea, Nietzsche upheld the notion that exploration into the depths of the human psyche, a necessary task for the heroic person, no matter the uncomfortable paths necessary to be taken, could potentially contribute to alleviate the burdens of human existence in majorly impactful ways. In *Human all too Human*, Nietzsche refers to the act of psychological observation as a kind of art form, and that "this art lends presence of mind in difficult situations and entertainment in tedious circumstances, that one can, indeed, pluck useful maxims from the thorniest and most disagreeable stretches of one's own life and thereby feel

---

24. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Ecce Homo*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32.

a little better.”<sup>25</sup> This potential means towards improvement, as Nietzsche further points out, has nonetheless been increasingly rejected up to the present-day.

Additionally, Nietzsche apparently largely blamed what he termed “the historical sense,” or rather the lack of it, for the emphasized feelings of hopelessness that individuals might contain within themselves in the face of the lack of rationality in the face of melancholia. To have a historical sense means that a modern individual is aware of their connection in general to past historical roots of humanity, and so further able to hold a sense of awareness about one’s position in the present. In other words:

“the contentment of the tree [is] in its roots, the happiness of knowing that one is not wholly accidental and arbitrary but grown out of a past as its heir, flower and fruit, and that one’s existence is thus excused and, indeed, justified – it is this which is today usually designated as the real sense of history.”

Nietzsche metaphorizes the individual with a sense of awareness about the past of human history, and thus about their own present position, as a being with a hopeful reason to continue investigation and exploration into the complexities of existence. Despite the simultaneous blend of both lack of understanding and surplus of knowledge that fundamentally characterizes the human predicament, Nietzsche ultimately upheld that the struggle through these ambiguities should be a task

---

25. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Human All too Human*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 31.

undertaken in a way such that the modern human strives towards their heroic lifestyle with both the assistance of the organizing idea and the historical sense. Finally, Nietzsche elucidates a thought as he attempts to describe the complex contradictions present within modern individuals, writing that “we ourselves are a type of chaos” at this point.<sup>26</sup> With seemingly sound trains of thoughts arguing to the internal psyche of the modern individual to be both hopeful and hopeless in the face of melancholia, we are again confronted with only the certainty that the wisest among us once stated before: that we are certain of nothing other than the certainty of knowing nothing. Because we come to the realization that any path or any door taken into investigate the depths of our predicament will eventually lead to no avail, our predicament remains fundamentally explained through Nietzsche’s statement that as we are led every time in our investigation to “a brazen wall of fate: we *are* in prison, [and] we can only *dream* ourselves free, not make ourselves free.”<sup>27</sup> –We can only ever hope to respond to our human predicament in the most proper way, but we can never actually know to any degree of certainty.

---

26. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 114.

27. Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Human All too Human*, (London: Morrison & Gibb Limited, 1910), 223.



(2) Matejko, Jan. *Starczyk*, 1862.

## The Dichotomous Responses to Melancholia

What I have to say probably wouldn't persuade most people. But you know, Socrates, that when someone thinks his end is near, he becomes frightened and concerned about things he didn't fear before. It's then that the stories we're told about Hades, about how people who've been unjust here must pay the penalty there—stories he used to make fun of—twist his soul this way and that for fear they're true. And whether because of the weakness of old age or because he is now closer to what happens in Hades and has a clearer view of it, or whatever it is, he is filled with foreboding and fear, and he examines himself to see whether he has been unjust to anyone. If he finds many injustices in his life, he awakes from sleep in terror, as children do, and lives in anticipation of bad things to come. But someone who knows that he hasn't been unjust has sweet good hope as his constant companion—a nurse to his old age, as Pindar says, for he puts it charmingly, Socrates, when he says that when someone lives a just and pious life

Sweet hope is in his heart,

Nurse and companion to his age.

Hope, captain of the ever-twisting

Minds of mortal men.

- Plato, *Republic*

The modern individual may identify many bodies of accumulated knowledge, along with other grand sophistications,<sup>28</sup> which were not known to the individuals of the past—those lost souls of yesterday who have missed the illuminations of today. But with regards to the human predicament, that perpetual quandary that defines the core of the human experience, the modern person finds themselves in the same ignorant position as every other *Homo sapien* has been in since the roots of human consciousness first began to branch out throughout the psyche. That is to say that, in fact, no amount of significant progress has been made towards a rational understanding of our human predicament, and even further, that on account of the limits imposed by our nature, we are certain of our inherent inability to uncover any degree of conscious awareness to a possible answer (including that there is no answer) may never be realized, and so any proposed attitudes or responses may at best be only dreamlike aspirations with no basis in human rationality. We may be described as a chaos, as Nietzsche does so, but especially because of the contradictions that are able to be manifested within us that are apparently inapplicable to the rest of the natural world.

Thus, as it has become more evident that the discussion surrounding the most proper response to melancholia is not one based on human rationality or on any measure of certainty, I move to present a dual set of concepts that I identify as the “dichotomous responses” to the human predicament with an argumentative grounding proper for this kind of problem which has no rationally solution.

---

28. E.g., science and technology.



Therefore, I introduce the terms “hopefulness” and “hopelessness” as the two most broad and fundamental responses able to be taken by human beings in the face of melancholia. I especially identify these terms as “broad” in the sense that all forms of possible human responses to melancholia fall within one of these two categorized terms, and as “fundamental” because they are of core central importance in adequately describing the solution to the human predicament. Proceeding, I shall now elaborate on these two dichotomous responses in order to further illustrate my argument for why they are the most adequate in addressing the human predicament.

To begin, then, to illustrate the response of the hopeful individual, I propose that we ponder to determine which historical person would especially suite the sort of heroic lifestyle and disposition of Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian man. In other words, we seek the epitome of nobleness whom could serve as an exemplar person to analyze in order to further our understanding concerning the meaning of the notion of hopefulness. Thus, I suggest this epitome of nobleness to be the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (470 B.C. – 399 B. C.) based on the premise that he is a most suitable candidate for Nietzsche’s description of the heroic individual, as he is portrayed throughout the written dialogues of Plato (428 B.C. – 327 B.C.).

As there are various aspects of Socrates emphasized among Plato’s writings, I specifically point to outline him as he is presented throughout the dialogue known as the *Phaedo*. Moreover, the *Phaedo* with a conversation between two characters, Echecrates and Phaedo, where discuss the events that occurred on the last day of

Socrates' life. In his retelling of these events, Phaedo specifically notes how unusual the emotional atmosphere of the companions present before Socrates died, as there was a mixture of sadness and cheer among them because though Socrates was to be put to death soon thereafter, he appeared peculiarly happy and without fear despite his gloomy situation.<sup>29</sup> In addition to this peculiarity, it is also mentioned how as the time for Socrates' death to take place neared, he had been rumored to have occupied himself during his time in prison by writing poetry, a task which he claimed to have been inspired to do based on certain dreams he had been having, and this especially sparked the curiosity of the sophist Evenus. At the mention of Evenus, Socrates then speaks his goodbyes to him (despite his absence), and mentions how just as any philosopher, Evenus should be *cheerfully* prepared to follow him in death. It is at this point that the dialogue begins to examine what could be called Socrates' philosophical attitude towards death, further claiming that "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Socrates further defines and defends his thesis about the wisest attitude to hold towards dying by firstly defining death as the separation between the body and the soul, and then by stating various reasons for why philosophers especially would be the most well-equipped to sustain such a separation. Incidentally, Socrates here is emphasized to uphold values inclined

---

29. Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 50-51.

30. *Ibid.*, 55.

towards a kind of asceticism, as he firstly points out that the true philosophers who have rejected the harmful bodily pleasures of food, drink, and sex, among other things, would necessarily be the most comfortable with freeing themselves from their physical bodies. Secondly, Socrates points out that since philosophers are those whom thirst the most for Truth, then they would especially be among those most anxious to be separated from the inaccurate and deceptive bodily senses<sup>31</sup> and be with the soul by itself.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Socrates argues philosophy to be a kind of training for dying, since it leads to the purification of a person's soul by allowing them to tread through life detached as much as possible from the petty influence of the body.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Socrates concludes his argument for the wisest attitude towards death by emphasizing how unreasonable it would be for a philosopher to fear death since it is the only thing in existence *most likely* to grant them the sort of Wisdom they had sought after—and yet never obtained—throughout all of human life. Unphilosophical people, on the other hand, or those characterized by lives wholly uninterested in Truth—the one's that remain at the superficial levels of the psyche—hold only “illusory appearance of virtue,”<sup>33</sup> and so cannot reasonably hope to be able to await death in the same way as the philosopher does. It is important to note that Socrates, who claimed to know nothing about Truth, did not claim to know that death would involve a desirable transition for a philosopher. Instead, Socrates

---

31. Socrates on the body: “it fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body,” (Ibid., 57-58).

32. Ibid., 55-56.

33. Ibid., 60.

claimed that this was simply the most likely result of living a life in pursuit of truthfulness; the life of the heroic individual. Thus, Socrates ultimately serves as the exemplar manifestation of the hopeful individual, as he confronted his own finite end, along with all of the contradictions that define the human experience (i.e., the human predicament), with a predominantly hopeful attitude for whatever was to come next. To be hopeful, then, as portrayed by Socrates, is not a response necessarily chosen on the basis of will, but rather it is a necessary condition of living the heroic life.

Moving on, in a general way, “hopelessness” may be thought of as the opposite of hopefulness, especially when considered as it manifests itself in individual trains of thought. In other words, if we have identified the exemplar individual of hopefulness as Socrates, generally because of his associated character traits and specifically because of his philosophical attitude of cheerfulness in the face of the unknown, then the epitome of *hopelessness* would be associated with a critical lack of the heroic character traits and a largely unphilosophical attitude towards death—one of inner existential apprehension. In addition, rather than identify a specific individual to serve as an exemplar for the hopeless, I instead broadly identify the philosophical attitudes of pessimism, nihilism, hedonism—the opposites of hope, world-affirmation, and asceticism—especially when unfounded, among those trains of thought predominantly exhibited in hopeless individuals. To be hopeless, then, similarly to hopefulness, is not a response to melancholia chosen

out of sheer will, but instead it is a necessary condition of rejecting the noble kinds of suffering pursued by heroic individuals.

The issue of the human predicament, then, is ultimately not a likely prospect to be achieved through the sort of rational thinking that is adequate for investigation into the natural world. Instead, this is a question belonging to the domain of theoretical reason, where the most that can be done to answer this particular unknown is to hypothesize about logical likelihoods, among a universe of speculation unable to be based on anything beyond hopeful conjectures. Whether there is or there is not a reason or cause for our experience and awareness of the human predicament is in the end not an attainable realization by any, not even the wisest or most profound, human being. Nevertheless, participation in the human experience still calls for an existential answer from the *Homo sapien* among the ambiguity that characterizes their humanity. And as rationality proves terminally insufficient in providing any sort of certainty concerning this human melancholia, the answer is ultimately expressed according to a hopeful response or a hopeless riposte by the essence of each individual person.



(3) Frans Francken the Younger. *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma: The Choice between Virtue and Vice*, 1633.

## Bibliography

Benson, Nigel. *The Psychology Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained*. New York: DK

Graham, Daniel W. *Heraclitus*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015,

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>

National Gallery of Art. "*Melencolia I*" (National Gallery of Art, 2017),

<https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/highlights/highlight35101.html>

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Ecce Homo*. Translated by Duncan Large. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Human, All Too Human: A book for free Spirits*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *The Will to Power*. Edited by Walter Kaufmann. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Untimely Meditations*. Edited by Daniel Breazeale. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, Indiana:  
Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Wittkower, Rudolf and Margot Wittkower. *Born Under Saturn: The Character and  
Conduct of Artists*. New York, Norton Publishing, 2006.



## Acknowledgements

As a final note, I would like to extend my gratitude towards all those who assisted and encouraged me during the development of this thesis project.

Thank you to Dr. Andrew Youpa (SIUC-Philosophy) for serving as my formal faculty advisor and providing me with guidance whenever asked of him.

Thank you also to Donnie McMann (SIUC-Philosophy) for serving as my graduate mentor, providing me with helpful resources from the onset of this project, and investing valuable lengths of time to discuss the ideas related to my writing.

Finally, thank you to my parents for providing me with continual support throughout the course of my lifelong education—up to the point of the completion of this honors thesis.

- Luis Trevino-Pena

Southern Illinois University Carbondale (Class of 2017)