

The Pitfalls of Ressentiment and the Perils of Uncritical Idealism.

It must have been during 2007. Having been grinding my teeth at night as I lay awake worrying about my academic career, I sat in the dentist chair, while my life-long dentist, the late Bruce Hambling used his excellent chair-side manner to put me at ease much better than any anesthetic could. He had followed my career like a years-long soap opera, through my controversial change of undergraduate major in 1985 from Computer Science to the History and Philosophy of Science, my MA at the New School in NYC in the early 90s, to my semester after semester of sessional tutoring at the University of Melbourne Department of Philosophy, eventually instigating and running a course on Nietzsche there from 2002 until 2007 while I completed my PhD. He had graduated from the MU School of Dentistry at about the time I arrived at MU for my first year, so he had always shown an interest in his *alma mater*.

As I sat in the chair, he told me about his hobby building and flying his own ultra-light gyrocopter, and I told him how worried I was about my work future. "Don't worry," he said, "they've accepted you. They've let you design, run and assess your own lecture course, which has attracted over 100 students a year and been a roaring success for, what, five years now? You've even run a fourth year seminar, supervised honours theses, and started up a postgrad organization called the MSCP. You're in. Just get on with it. Now, open wide..."

2nd May 2010 - 1 Fatal - G-102 single seat open gyrocopter crash near Lameroo, South Australia - Fatal. Local media report the deceased pilot as Robert Bruce Hambling.



Photo credit ABC News

[Link to ABC Riverland News report 2.5.10](#)

[Newspaper Link to Accident 2.5.10](#)

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You only have to look at [this tribute page](#) to see just how well-beloved Bruce Hambling was. His optimism was infectious without being superficial. It was however marred by a tragic flaw of uncritical idealism. Bruce's idealism was implicit, and not something he thought about. It was manifest most clearly perhaps in his faith that the air is basically simple: a locally flat and reliable background you can use to travel around in. And by and large it is. Like the ocean, it has huge flat fields of laminar flow within which a vehicle can safely travel.

But unlike the ocean, and more like tectonic plates, the atmosphere is riven with sudden breaks

and jagged edges of invisible turbulence, rifts and faults which are not static, but three-dimensional surfaces which move and bend like a twisted balloon. It's easy to idealise away this chaos and ignore it. And under most circumstances, it won't be a problem: fair weather flying in an ultralight or a glider is about as close to transcendence as a mortal can get. But the ideal days of idyllic flying run the risk of hitting the unlikely event of a mobile wall of sudden and unexpected turbulence in which the usual agreement of ground-relative and air-relative up, down, left, right and forwards, backwards can be broken in myriad of ways. Up can become down, left become right, forwards become backwards, all in less time than it takes the human body to respond. Control is lost and gravity slams the craft into the ground.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/feb/09/permanent-casual-labor-new-ir-laws-workers>

The exploitation of casual academic workers pioneered by Melbourne University has provided the business world with a model of growing popularity. Keeping workers insecure not only means that they work harder and longer in the hope that their labour will be appreciated and rewarded with more stable employment. It also means that those in power get a benefit that is not at all fringe, but actually core: the increase in the feeling of power that comes from playing with people's lives like pieces on a chess board. This unavowed bonus cannot be reduced to mere dollars and cents, for it is a qualitative boost to the growth of esteem for those in power. Sacrificing casual pawns strengthens the will of the core players, utilizing the delusion that pawns might somehow become bishops, rooks of knights, if not actually kings and queens.

The mismatch between the casual worker's hope that the integrity of the permanent staff will prevail and the decades of toil will be acknowledged with full employment mirrors a pattern of power prevalent since time immemorial. The "town bike" does not eventually graduate to the dignity of a respectable spouse. The more those bearing the brunt of disrespected sacrifice, the further away they move from achieving respectable status. The more casual work the sessional lecturer does, the less likely the sessional is to be given a real job, for the unconscious question poses itself in the minds of the powerful -- "why has this schmuck allowed themselves to be exploited for so long?" The conclusion is inescapable: it is because they are an inferior person.

Holly Lawson-Smith's tweet in response to recent industrial action at Melbourne University, in which students went out on strike in support of sessional lecturers is a case in point. Her tweet was hastily deleted soon after being posted, so I cannot reproduce it here, but she wrote that the tenured lecturers had their jobs because they were the world's best intellectuals, and that it would be damaging for the university to give inferior academics permanent jobs just because they've done a bit of casual lecturing. In short, power supplies its own rationale according to an ancient paradigm: the rich must be the best, because fortune has rewarded them, and the poor must be bad, because fortune has punished them. In short, the powerful exonerate themselves and denigrate the victims of their exploitation, concluding that it is simply their fault.

This is why recent attempts by the University to engineer a clear conscience for itself do not go to the heart of the problem. Twenty million dollars might seem like a lot of money for the University to be paying out to smooth over the problem of exploited casuals, but it is in fact a cheap way for the University to establish the narrative that the problem basically concerns a few accounting details, and does not actually go to the core of the University's mission and the heart of what the University represents.

<https://www.fairwork.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/2023-media-releases/february-2023/20230210-university-of-melbourne-second-litigation-media-release#:~:text=The%20Fair%20Work%20Ombudsman%20therefore,to%20be%20false%20or%20misleading.>

But this is not so, for as the University so often proclaims, it is in fact a cultural leader. In other words, the business world looks at the University and says to itself, if they can get away with it, then so can we. And this dynamic mirrors the dynamic within the University itself. For although

Philosophy might be thought to have become a marginalized discipline struggling for survival in the economically rationalized institution of today, philosophy has actually come to play a crucial role in engineering a clear conscience for the University as a whole, and in a sense remains at the head of the University -- "the eye of the fish" as the Chinese proverb puts it. In so far as it has been given over to the study of ethics, the role of the School of Philosophy within the University models the role of the University in the wider community. In other words, if the ethical experts of the School of Philosophy can get away with it, then the University as a whole can get away with it, and if the University can get away with it, then so can any and every employer in the country.

This brings me at last to my title: "The Pitfalls of Ressentiment and the Perils of Uncritical Idealism." A prevalent cultural phenomenon in the USA exemplifies the pitfall of resentment with shocking clarity. With depressing regularity, the disgruntled and marginalized individual shows up at the institution from which they have been excluded with a gun and kills as many colleagues as possible before turning the gun on themselves. This is usually a teenage boy at a high school, although many a male adult has also committed such acts, and even on rare occasions a woman, too. Without descending into the infinite complications of American sociology, it has to be said that this distressing phenomenon is due primarily to the availability of guns in America, rather than any special American hegemony on resentment. The desire for revenge is globally attested, and the conjunction of masculinity and juvenility an especially intense focus of this conjunction. From the seeds of the second world war sown by the German humiliation at the end of the first, to Israel's indiscriminate slaughter of Palestinians and obliteration of all of Palestine's Universities and most of its schools and hospitals in revenge for Hamas's Operation Al Aqsa Flood on October 7th 2023, the overwhelming urge to exact revenge for outrage and humiliation remains a potent and ubiquitous force in human affairs worldwide.

Perhaps I too was motivated by this base desire when, during my final semester teaching the Nietzsche course, I put the following numbers up on the board, and invited students to guess what they represented:

700,000
70,000
7,000

The top line was the Vice-Chancellor Glynn Davis's salary, the middle line, their combined tuition fees for taking the course, and the bottom line was my own salary for teaching the course. To charge students ten times what it cost the university to run the course is an outrage, given that this then became a HECS debt (Higher Education *Contribution* Scheme), the myth being that their tuition fees only *contributed* to the cost of providing their education. The reality was that it was in fact ten times more than what it actually cost. And the surplus? Obviously, it went into the pocket of the Vice Chancellors and all his well-paid cronies, who did no teaching whatsoever, merely raking in the big bucks for their administrative busy-work and enslaving the students to debt for decades.

As a strategy of revenge my impotent gesture was fatally flawed, for unsurprisingly the following year my income was reduced to zero. Meanwhile, a British migrant was soon brought in from the UK and given a tenured position to teach the courses I had been teaching, being paid in one single year more than I had been in my entire decade of casual work, and another British migrant, Duncan Maskell, moved into the Vice Chancellor's position, and is now being paid more than twice the amount I had Glyn Davis was in 2007, at \$1.6 million per annum, while my name was slandered and I was labelled "difficult" and my student feedback forms with handwritten comments from the students were put into a shredder before I even saw them. That was my reward for outperforming the tenured lecturers.

My challenge is thus to find a way to be something other than typical. For typically, the disgruntled are uncritical idealists. The ideal is clear to the outraged: what has happened is not fair precisely

because an ideal espoused by the offending party has not been lived up to: from the kindergarten playground to the Security Council of the United Nations, this is the lament of the disgruntled -- "they" say they stand for justice, but "their" actions belie this appearance and mask a mere lust for power. To unmask the hypocrisy is the core motive of the disgruntled: to make the hypocrites "pay for it." This is the core agenda of revenge. The Germans wanted France and their allies to pay for the Treaty of Versailles; Hitler wanted the Jews to pay for rejecting his artwork; the disgruntled American teenage boy wants his bullies to pay for their disrespect; and the furious incel wants women to pay for their haughty rejections and cruel humiliations; the jilted lover wants their ex to pay leaving them; feminists want men to pay for centuries of unjust repression; Hamas want Israel to pay for colonizing Palestine; and Israel want Hamas to pay for their attack on October 7th 2023. This list could go on for hundreds of pages, and still be no closer to completion.

The self-righteous anger experienced by the disgruntled is *typically* repressed, and the disgruntled ones congratulate themselves upon the growing strength which undoubtedly develops in order to contain the growing pressure within them. This pressure either finds some gradual release through process such as indefinite deferral or symbolic transference. If my language sounds like Freudian mechanisms, that's only because Sigmund Freud and I have both read Nietzsche. But unlike Sigmund Freud and his myriad epigones, I do not misunderstand Nietzsche as a materialist who thinks that man is a machine. The mind is not a machine and it does not operate through mere mechanisms. It is an ensemble of organic process, and for all his disagreements with both Goethe and Leibniz, Nietzsche is far closer to both of them, and to Whitehead, than he is to Freud and Lacan. Leibniz and Goethe both explained how much, if not most, of what goes on in the mind is unconscious ("Man cannot long endure the state of awareness or consciousness; he must ever again escape into the unconscious, for there live his roots": Goethe), but it was Nietzsche's innovation to explain that the inner world is an appearance too, just as much as the outer world. This is misunderstood by Freud's dualism, which divides the mind ontologically into two different things, the conscious and the unconscious minds, which sit side by side like a rider and a horse. Lacan's twist, which says that the unconscious is "structured like a language" is a little less far of the mark, but it still fails to fully appreciate Nietzsche's crucial insight.

If the inner world is an appearance too, then the conscious and unconscious are related less like rider and horse, and more like oil and water. A degree of consciousness permeates our inner life, even our dreams, but even at our most lucid, we are no more aware of the nature of those organic processes than we are at our least conscious. We work always and only with appearances, thoughts being strong feelings and feelings weak thoughts. We can always tell the difference between them, but they flow past and through each other without mixing yet inseparably involved with one another, unable to eliminate one another, always unstable if one tries to repress the other.

Nietzsche borrowed the term "sublimation" from Goethe, who had taken it from alchemy as it was evolving into chemistry in his day. Matter is commonly known to have three phases (solid, liquid and gas), each phase a region of continuity separated by a discontinuous transition into the neighbouring phase, transitions typically precipitated by changes in temperature. The simplest example from everyday life is water, a solid below zero Celsius, a liquid between zero and one hundred degrees, and a gas above one hundred, the familiar phase transitions known as freezing/melting and boiling/condensing respectively. We have now also learned that at further extremes of cold, a super-solid state exists, and at super-heated temperatures, a super-gaseous state known as plasma also exists, raising the phases of matter to at least five. In chemistry, a substance is said to sublime when it jumps between two non-adjacent phases, skipping the intermediate one. The most familiar example of such a phase-skip is "dry ice" used to generate fog in theatrical performances, i.e. solid carbon dioxide, which under normal atmospheric conditions on Earth, sublimates from a solid to a gas without passing through the liquid phase.

Although not explicitly thematized by Nietzsche (in accordance with his philosophy of masks elaborated in *Beyond Good and Evil* part 9), his use of Goethe's metaphor for transitions in the growth of the mind, spirit or soul is crucial to his philosophical development and perhaps his central psychological discovery. Nietzsche saw how the ancient Greeks had discovered conditions for such psychological sublimations: turning anger into victory without going through an intervening phase of war through the invention of sport, for example, or turning grief into wisdom without going through years of struggle with the invention of tragic theatre, or turning the strife of divergent opinions into the harmony of wisdom without having to go through a phase of physical fighting, with the invention of philosophical dialogue by Socrates.

Nietzsche's thoughts on sublimation first emerge early in his career in *Human All Too Human*, the 95th sections of each of the three volumes of that work ("Morality and the Mature Individual," "Love," and "Our Prose") providing a three-fold meditation on sublimation, individuality, personality and creativity of profound significance. In keeping with his meditations on the philosophy of masks, this theme of sublimation swims deep beneath the surface of his evolving body of work, bubbles percolating to the surface for example in *Dawn* sections 202 and 248, and in the visions of metamorphosis in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, but only surface fully formed in *Beyond Good and Evil* section 189, in the notebook published as *Will to Power* section 677, and in *Genealogy of Morals* book II section 7 and book III section 27.

Freud's appropriation of this theme as the mere transference of the energy of repressed sexual instincts onto other creative endeavours misunderstands this dynamic as a mere hydraulic mechanism of pressure-relief, but the sublimated instinct transforms the solid animal within us into an entire atmosphere of possibility transforming individuality along with it. The frustrations of injustice which all of face in our own way each seem to be the main problem with humanity. The poor always see economic injustice as the basic problem in the world; the feminist always sees sexual discrimination as the all-pervasive injustice whose overcoming will usher in a new epoch of a less unjust world; the broader LGBTIQAA+ community likewise perceive our rigid assumption of binary gender as the straightjacket from which we must be liberated if we are to establish a world of freedom and justice for all; the humanist sees nationalism as the root of the problem; the pacifist likewise militarism, the anarchist likewise managerialism, the managers apathy, the religious godlessness, the atheists mythological delusion. The list goes on and on, with each perspective undeniably right in its own terms.

The methodology of sublimation does not pick sides in this many-sided debate, nor claim to identify the one true problem with the world and ultimate source of injustice holding the human race back from reaching its full potential. It warns rather that repression is a dead-end street, and a path opposite to progress. Rather than identifying, attacking and suppressing the enemy, the method of sublimation transforms the very concept of enmity into a symbolic gradient able to skip the typical and leap instead straight to the transformative. This alchemy of the soul aims to lift us out of the impasses of conflict, and show us the possibilities of recontextualization, in which blood-lust transforms into healthy competition, soul-destroying grief transforms into artistic achievement, bitter disagreement into insightful realization. Hammering away at the same old debates, or even at new debates, cannot lift us beyond the limits of hammering. What is needed are new contexts which transform the old bashing of solid heads into a new swirling of our personal substance in a phase where their very nature is transformed into gaseous states in which collisions are no longer possible and interactions as unlike the old insoluble debates as two rocks are to two clouds. Or perhaps as two liquids are to a plasma more energetically creative than either oil or water can be under the old conditions, thanks to the transformed context of a whole new background behind us.