

THE MISUNDERSTOOD NIETZSCHE:
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF SABBATH REST AND ACTIVE
STRUGGLE BEYOND THE NEOLIBERAL DIALECTIC OF
MEDIOCRITY AND EXCELLENCE

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Abstract: The Nietzschean master-slave philosophy is reduced by neoliberal capitalism into the dialectic of mediocrity and excellence. The slave is represented as the underachieving subject who evades the struggles of institutional growth, while the master is portrayed as the one whose authority and nobility emerge from productivity and achievement. Contemporary society consequently equates master morality with high performers and ruling elites who naturally dominate slaves due to their elevated positions of power. However, this perspective fails to consider how neoliberal capitalism's logic of power, based on achievement and perpetual optimisation, is inherently reactive. Thus, I propose that this logic establishes an organised framework operating on slave morality. By redefining the master and slave dynamic not as permanent positions but as active and reactive forces that can manifest at any locus, I perform a critique against the reduction of the master-slave into simplistic dialectical relations. Hence, I argue that the neoliberal notions of the master and the slave are both based on slave morality. My critique is achieved by exploring the complex relationship between rest and struggle – showing how each can embody either active or reactive forces in a Deleuzian sense.

Keywords: master morality, slave morality, neoliberal capitalism, institutional growth, sabbath rest

1. INTRODUCTION: MISCONCEIVING NIETZSCHE'S MASTER AS SLAVE

Nietzsche's philosophy of master-slave relations is usually bastardised within contemporary organisational contexts. The

dynamic is often reduced into a simplistic model of exploitation based on growth, productivity, and excellence, which are values that substantially align with the demands of neoliberal capitalism. This model conditions subjectivity to characterise success based on commodified values that accelerate the process of capitalist production.

In these contexts, Nietzsche's master is misinterpreted as the one who naturally dominates slaves – commonly associated with the ruling elites seizing positions of power (Ezema, Areji, & Ohubuenyi 2017, 265). The master is thought to possess vigorous pride and ambition by accumulating power through capitalising on other people. This leads to equating mastery with the relentless pursuit of productivity and achievement, which contemporary society recognises as primary hallmarks of success. Han (2015) shared in his book, *The Burnout Society*, that “Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society [*Leistungsgesellschaft*]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer “obedience-subjects” but “achievement-subjects”. They are entrepreneurs of themselves”.

We are living in the age of certificate hoarding. It is common for the achievement-subject to associate self-mastery with excelling within work conditions that demand an extravagance of these occupational testimonials. These credentials disclose an individual's constant pursuit of growth, which is obviously a bearing on capitalist production. Neoliberalism is impatient with everything that is inefficient and slow; its system is invigorated by constant hyperactivity (Barte 2025, 80). It needs subjects to be consistently compliant with its insistence on productivity. However, is this pursuit entirely different from what Nietzsche refers to as slave morality? Does growth within the contexts of neoliberalism accurately exemplify what he refers to as the master?

Nietzsche (1956) said that slave morality is hostile to its own nature. It requires an external factor for it to produce action; all its actions are merely reactive to the external. The slave lacks enough sovereignty to affirm itself. In case the slave defines its notion of

power, it only conceives of power as an object of recognition (Deleuze 1983, 10). Though neoliberalism establishes positions of power based on the previously mentioned conception of growth, these positions should not be confused with Nietzsche's will to power, but are merely a representation of power. Such representation perfectly describes the reactivity of slave morality and systematically compels subjects to remain inferior and dominated by the systemic demand for productivity.

The imperative to achieve is the precept of contemporary labour to regulate human behaviour. The labourer who does nothing but work lacks sovereignty. Its strife for achievement becomes its reaction to the very system which dominates it.

In reality, it is not the excess of responsibility and initiative that makes one sick, but the imperative to achieve: the new *commandment* of late-modern labour society. [...] In fact, Nietzsche would say that that human type in the process of becoming reality en masse is no sovereign superman but "the last man", who does nothing but work. The new human type, standing exposed to excessive positivity without any defence, lacks all sovereignty. (Han 2015, 10)

In the case of the ruling elites, Deleuze (1983) clarified that the master does not perceive situations dialectically because dialectical thought is the slave's way of thinking. How do rulers think dialectically then? Firstly, the ruler in the current labour setting is reactive to neoliberalism's established values. It embodies these values and develops confidence from it. Secondly, it celebrates these values as objects of recognition and therefore attributes itself to these established values. Its urge for domination is dialectical in nature as well. This is why Ezema and his colleagues' portrayal of Nietzsche's master is ultimately mistaken because the master does not think in dialectical terms.

In addition, Deleuze used the word *dominant* to describe the active force not in relation to the *dominated*, but is complemented by an internal will which affirms itself (Deleuze 1983, 51). The act of domination depends on an external factor, which is its relationship with those perceived as dominated. For this reason, the act of *ruling*

in the case of late-modern labour construes the master in dialectical relations with the slave, and is a relational model produced by the slave's way of thinking. Such an act is a product of internalising the exploited representation of power. As Nietzsche himself claimed, a plethora of institutions are predominated by mechanisms where the sick exhibits some form of superiority and exercise tyranny over the strong (Nietzsche 1956, 260). The true master affirms himself and does not recognise his position as a negation to the slave (Bolaños 2014, 14). Thus, interpreting the master as a dominator of slaves is a bad reading of Nietzsche's master.

Flee, my friend, into your solitude: I see you stung by poisonous flies. Flee to where the raw, rough breeze blows!

Flee into your solitude! You have lived too near the small and the pitiable men. Flee from their hidden vengeance! Towards you, they are nothing but vengeance.

No longer lift your arm against them! They are innumerable, and it is not your fate to be a fly-swat. (Nietzsche 1969, 79)

Contrary to the claim that the master and the slave are two juxtaposed types of human beings (Ezema, Areji, & Ohubuenyi 2017, 265), I propose that they are rather forces which can transpire at any position. In fact, Han pointed out that our present society creates conditions where an individual can become both a slave and master to himself; the master has become the labouring slave (Han 2015, 19). This means that the forces causing one into becoming what Nietzsche portrays as either a master or a slave are fluid and multiple. In my understanding, this explains why Deleuze transitioned in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* from using the master-slave relational model to utilising the terms *active* and *reactive* forces to represent the two modes, especially because the idea of the master and the slave can indefinitely be dialectical. As Deleuze himself stated, "Moreover, the relation of master and slave is not, in itself, dialectical. Who is the dialectician, who dialecticises the relationship? It is the slave, the slave's perspective" (Deleuze 1983, 10). Unlike master-slave relations, which can easily identify an individual as

either a master or a slave, active and reactive forces can dynamically and simultaneously manifest within a single individual.

2. BEYOND THE DIALECTICS OF REST AND STRUGGLE

Active and reactive forces are evaluative modes that represent two different ways of seeing life (Bolaños 2014, 16). Deleuze begins his account of these two forces by distinguishing the concept of force from the concept of will. Forces, he explains, are inherently victorious; their interactions always involve relations of dominance in which the stronger force prevails over the weaker. However, determining which position of force is considered higher or greater requires prior evaluation. This is why the notion of a victorious force cannot stand alone and must be complemented by an internal will, which serves as the force's evaluative framework (Deleuze 1983, 49).

Will, by contrast, functions as the differential and generative principle of force (Deleuze 1983, 7). This means that the evaluation and differentiation of forces that make the *will to power* possible originates from will itself. As Deleuze explains, "Force is what can, will to power is what wills" (Deleuze 1983, 50). Yet he also cautions that the danger of becoming reactive emerges from confusing force with will. An example of this includes the nihilistic characteristic of certain scientific perspectives, which interpret phenomena from the petty side of reactions (Deleuze 1983, 45). In fields of Biology or Psychology, for instance, the organism is habitually described in terms of reactive forces – reducing it to its nutrition, reproduction, conservation, and adaptation, which are all essentially reactive functions (Deleuze 1983, 41). This happens because confusing force with will leads to the reduction of force into a mere mechanism. Mechanistic thinking perceives final states as identical with initial states, which reduces differences into undifferentiated states (Deleuze 1983, 46). Similarly, Psychopathology obeys the same logic

by interpreting symptoms as undifferentiated states that appear identically across individuals diagnosed with the same disorder, which is why the field's acumen recognises each classified pathology as a repetition of the same symptoms.

Based on these points, active force can be defined as that which reaches out for power (Nietzsche 2017, 371). Nietzsche's notion of power should not be conflated with modernity's reactive representations of power. Whereas the neoliberal figure of the 'master' derives authority from achievement and validation, the truly active force is one that commands and affirms itself from within. On the other hand, the inferior force, that is the reactive force, is characterised by being subjugated from its obedience to another force. This dynamic between active-reactive forces is visibly expressed in contemporary performance-oriented culture through the opposition between rest and struggle, which this essay seeks to explore.

Revisualizing Deleuze's active and reactive forces in the forms of rest and struggle is conducive to developing a critique against the emerging opposition between the concept of rest and the concept of struggle. This emerging view on the rest-struggle dynamic produced a new dialectical relationship between mediocrity and excellence in the age of achievement. It progressed into a new reactive model of the master and the slave, wherein the subject is always compelled to 'work under pressure'. Otherwise, the subject is denominated as a loser.

Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. [...]

Disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers. (Han 2015, 8-9)

The achievement-oriented society bastardised Nietzsche's famous line in *Twilight of the Idols*, "What does not kill me, makes me

stronger”, which operates on the pressure to remain positive regardless of the circumstance (Reyes 2025, 236-237). This utilises the dogma of the *growth mindset* to define excellence based on a subject’s ability to optimistically endure any struggle it confronts. However, this conventional dogma fails to differentiate the form of struggle which liberates from the one that suppresses. It falls under the presumption that all forms of struggle are active, encouraging individuals to be fascinated by the *hustle culture* as a new form of subjugation.

While Han pointed out that the achievement-subject is free from any external domination forcing it to work (Han 2015, 11), the embedded compulsion in an achievement-oriented system is still an external mode of control that has been internalised by the achievement-subject. I completely agree with Han when he said that this system creates an auto-exploitation (a situation wherein the achievement-subject exploits itself from the feeling of freedom in maximising achievement) based on excess work and performance, but I differ from his claim that external domination has disappeared. The compulsive freedom that comes from this auto-exploitation is still a product of domination relative to the concept of reactive force. This is how the *hustle culture* became an exploited definition of excellence.

Additionally, the inefficiency of inactivity is considered unproductive and time-consuming in an era of hustle. As Han stated:

Contemplation is opposed to production. Contemplation engages with what is unavailable yet already given. [...]

The compulsion to be active, to produce and to perform leads to breathlessness. Under the weight of their own doings, humans suffocate. (Han 2024, 32-34)

Resting is too inefficient to be a favourable ground for social control. Its delays are seen as counterproductive by neoliberalism’s aspiration to optimise the accelerated accumulation of capital. But similar to the act of generalising all forms of struggle as active, the

neoliberal reduction of rest and inactivity into what is considered reactive, due to its inefficiency to the system, deserves to be elaborated further. Why? Because it is equally mistaken to presume that all forms of rest are good. “We are losing the sense for the kind of inactivity that is not an incapability, not a refusal, not just the absence of activity but a capacity in itself” (Han 2024, 7). Though not stated explicitly, Han’s creative view of rest, as a form of inactivity, should be regarded as an active force that can be contrasted to a reactive type of rest based on incapability and escape.

By distinguishing the active and reactive forms of both rest and struggle, this essay aims to elaborate on their differences. Exploring this differentiation allows us to overcome the rest-struggle dialectic and understand rest and struggle in ways that are not merely defined by becoming derivatives of work. Only by discerning whether our rest and struggle arise from active rather than reactive forces can we begin to regain the rhythm of our own respiration – of what it truly means *to breathe* whenever we cherish rest and endure struggle.

3. REST, RESPIRATION, AND SABBATH

“The silence of God resounds as chaos, as we have grown unable to breathe at the rhythm of our own respiration, which has been captured by the apocalyptic force of the algorithm of financial capitalism”. (Berardi 2018, 46). The pace of our breathing is surmounted by capitalist production to the extent that our definition of rest has become derivative of it. This excerpt from Berardi’s *Breathing* poetically communicates the profane redefinition of rest in contemporary society.

In the Jewish tradition, the practice of Sabbath requires the suspension of economic life to give way to genuine festivity (Han 2024, 8). It opens the opportunity for contemplative rest, which, similar to the Seventh Day of Creation, is an appreciation of life and the world. For contemplation to be possible during the Sabbath, it requires silence, because only through it can true listening be

possible. This is the reason why Sabbath is considered a festival of rest and reflection (Han 2020, 37).

In contrast, capitalism strips the festival of its contemplative essence by reducing it to a mere spectacle. In the Philippines, for instance, San Miguel Corporation transforms traditional Filipino *fiestas* into commercial spaces – subjugating premises with branded tents, advertisements, and the sale of their alcoholic beverages to increase their revenue and promotion. These events are amplified through sponsored concerts that draw crowds into these spaces, effectively turning native fiestas into a commodified spectacle. Given this, capitalism never rests and despises silence because they decelerate the production process; instead, it thrives on the provocation of expression and the pandemonium. Although expression is often understood as a sign of freedom, and silence as a form of repression, Deleuze would have argued otherwise. In this specific situation, expression is both reactive and compulsive.

It's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. (Deleuze 1997, 176)

That is why rest is an essential element of a genuine festival, since both rest and festival emerge from silence and contemplation. On the Sabbath, it is through this same silence that a person cultivates both discernment and sensitivity toward others. The symbolism of God's rest on the seventh day does not simply imply recovery from his work in the past six days; rather, rest is his nature (Han 2020, 36). The concept of rest originates from a separate ontotheology compared to work since the former is originally sacred, and the latter, profane (Han 2020, 38). Yet neoliberal capitalism eliminates the boundary between sacred and profane by totalizing production in all areas of life, and therefore subordinating rest to its mandates (Han 2020, 43).

Finally, when capitalism succeeds in subordinating rest to its notion of work, free time is reductively defined in relation to the

demands of capitalist labour. This results in a dialectic relationship between leisure and work; temporality becomes confined within the boundaries of the two. Leisure time outside working hours becomes the only remaining time to be spent. The expenditure of such a time either degrades into a means of escape from or recovery for work. While neoliberalism is more permissive of recovery that serves to restore productivity, it condemns any act of escape as mediocrity. Worse still, those who persistently demand recovery are subjected to the same denomination. Here, the compulsion to work is imminent; free time is only perceived as a derivative of productivity. The pressure to perform quietly persists even within moments of rest as the performance-subject remains preoccupied with the anticipation of work.

Nietzsche expressed a similar critique against the compulsion of what he called *unrestrained labour* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He said that those who cherish such labour ‘endure themselves ill’ and further remarked: “If you believed more in life, you would devote yourselves less to the moment. But you have insufficient capacity for waiting – or even for laziness” (Nietzsche 1969, 73). He implicitly considers *waiting* and *laziness* as active forces in contrast to unrestrained labour, therefore aligning with Han’s assertion that delay and inactivity can become modes of intensity. The intensity of rest contemporary society fails to cultivate is the experience of stable, meaningful respiration resonating beyond the structures of work and production. “We no longer know the holy, festive calmness that unites intensity of life with contemplation, and is still able to unite them even when intensity of life grows into exuberance” (Han 2024, 7). Thus, we arrive at a distinction between active rest exemplified by the Sabbath and its reactive form, which transpires through leisure.

Was Nietzsche against the practice of Sabbath? His attack on the Sabbath in *Beyond Good and Evil* is directed towards the reactive return to an undifferentiated final unity that eliminates the disturbances residing within all of us (Nietzsche 1997, 66). The Hanian Sabbath, on the other hand, proposes an active affirmation

of life in the face of the slave morality which neoliberalism hegemonises. Hence, the Nietzschean critique of Sabbath and the Hanian discourse on contemplative rest are not contradictory but two conjunctive states that embody active forces. “Everything among them speaks, no one knows any longer how to understand” (Nietzsche 1969, 203-204).

4. BREATHING AT THE RHYTHM OF CHAOS

The famous line “To live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in suffering” is often misattributed to Nietzsche. In fact, he never wrote this as it originates from Gordon Allport’s preface to Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1963, xi). Although the sentiment of this quotation can sometimes resonate with certain aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy, popular interpretations circumventing the quote tend to universalise suffering across all kinds of struggle; this does not truthfully reflect his Dionysian view of tragedy. Such bad readings mislead people into thinking that Nietzsche advocates an unconditional submission to anything that causes pain. But bad conscience, as interiorization of guilt and accusation, produces pain from turning against oneself (Deleuze 1983, 128-129). His philosophy may oftentimes contain wisdom found in suffering and self-overcoming; however, transforming these into repetitive mechanisms of control and passivity is an entirely different matter. As he pointed out in *The Gay Science*:

I abhor all those moralities which say: “Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!” But I am well disposed toward those moralities which goad me to do something and do it again, from morning till evening, and then to dream of it at night, and to think nothing except doing this *well*, as well as *I* alone can do it. When one lives like that, one thing after another that simply does not belong to such a life drops off. (Nietzsche 1974, 244)

Neoliberal capitalism conditions individuals into believing that refusing to submit to the struggles caused by the imperative to work

is equivalent to refusing growth itself. In this case, it has subordinated both rest and growth. Nietzsche, however, describes this reduced notion of growth as a form of obedience to a limited trajectory of human development. He refers to it as the ‘moral hypocrisy of the commanding class’, rooted in the herd-instinct of bad conscience which they impose upon themselves before presuming to command others (Nietzsche 1997, 65). This moral hypocrite, which in his vocabulary is the ‘gregarious man’, represents a false image of power because it preserves and empowers itself *via* conforming to institutional demands either by performing its authoritative functions or by displaying its glorified traits, so that it appears desirable within the system that legitimises it. In this context, the notion of growth deceivingly represses the performance-subject and is something Nietzsche had always been roughly cautious of.

On the other hand, his notion of Dionysian tragedy represents active, cathartic struggle in the sense that it affirms chance and multiplicity. Deleuze’s dicethrow deliberately represents such affirmation by differentiating the life-typologies of the bad and the good player. The dicethrow fails because the bad player throws the dice several times to probabilistically reproduce a desirable combination. The good player, however, throws the dice as a pure affirmation of all chances at once, not as a final winning combination, but as the fatal combination that is inherent in chaos (Reyes 2025, 142). Cathartic pain emerges from the relationship between the limited human condition and the multiplicity of chaos, not from the inward gloom of bad conscience.

In Nietzsche’s philosophy, growth is the becoming of ‘a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health’, which he described as an unknown territory whose boundaries nobody has surveyed yet, and is an expression of benevolence that might often appear inhuman (Nietzsche 1974, 346-347). It means the abandonment of rigidification by plunging oneself into the void of all identity. Such an idea of growth greatly differs from the pain of burnout and

exhaustion experienced by the achievement-subject, because excellence in the achievement society is a byproduct of bad conscience. Consequently, inactivity and unproductiveness relative to the demands of capitalist work become a source of guilt. It reproduces the same compulsion (and pleasure) to work, which is merely an internalisation of standardised control mechanisms.

The active form of struggle cannot be created by what Nietzsche calls the ‘tyrant of reason’ who considers stupidity (narrowing of perspectives) as a condition of life and development (Nietzsche 1997, 58). In the sense of the dicethrow, this is the tyranny of a winning combination that is meant to deny chance and multiplicity. An ideology becomes a source of domination that standardises thought. Educators, for instance, may practice a tyrannical approach by subordinating students to their preferred ideologies. Such tyranny limits the event of chance through compelling students to function based on the bad conscience of their teacher. It diminishes multiplicity by reducing the quantity of possibilities, especially the chances of disagreement and disobedience among students. What students fail to encounter here is chaos, which Berardi refers to as the irreducible chaos transpiring beyond the borders of our established order (Berardi 2018, 41).

It is as if the *struggle against chaos* does not take place without an affinity with the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the struggle *against opinion*, which claims to protect us from chaos itself. (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 221).

On the contrary, genuine growth cannot be established upon the compulsion to function. The good teacher, as per the dicethrow, develops different conditions that preserve chance and multiplicity – expanding the students’ ability to learn from and interact with the organic uncertainty of the world. Students, in this case, may misunderstand their teacher or one another, and this is simply a natural part of human development. Students are even allowed to criticise their teacher’s opinions about the dicethrow, or perhaps to come into conflict with one another, because the good teacher

knows that true development emerges from the pains of multiplicity. It prepares students to breathe and vibrate at the same rhythm as chaos – to harmonise better with the fluctuations of the real world.

5. A CONJUNCTION BETWEEN REST AND STRUGGLE

In neoliberal capitalism, slave morality manifests in the forms of revenge, compulsory growth, and passive pleasure. Revenge *via* resentment emerges from the impotence to respond to pain; therefore, “experience a desire for revenge, and, by a process of generalisation, would want to take this out on the whole world” (Deleuze 1983, 115-117). This originates from the inability to take action, which ends up turning their misfortune into something mediocre. An active force does not wage war with mediocrity; instead, it sees what is beautiful and necessary in them (Nietzsche 1974, 223).

It is the sign of strong, rich temperaments that they cannot for long take seriously their enemies, their misfortunes, their *misdeeds*; for such characters have in them an excess of plastic curative power, and also a power of oblivion. (Nietzsche 1956, 173).

Additionally, resentment can also refer to the means that make revenge possible. As Deleuze stated, “We have not understood *ressentiment* if we only see it as a *desire* for revenge, a desire to rebel and triumph” (Deleuze 1983, 116). Deleuze himself clarified that the topological principle of resentment is a state of reactive forces that no longer allow themselves to act – that deny themselves. In alignment with the bad conscience which made compulsive growth possible, the internalisation of achievement and excellence founded on external control is thus another process of resentment. It essentially embodies the decadence in slave morality. “The vain person rejoices over every good opinion which he hears about himself”, Nietzsche wrote, “just as he suffers from every bad opinion: for he subjects himself to both” (Nietzsche 1997, 130).

Lastly, the experience of pleasure in the previously discussed process of resentment is passive and is Nietzsche's reason for criticising Sabbath. "[...] in utter contrast to what is called happiness among the impotent and oppressed, who are full of bottled-up aggressions. Their happiness is purely passive and takes the form of drugged tranquillity, stretching and yawning, peace, 'sabbath', emotional slackness" (Nietzsche 1956, 172). Nietzsche, however, affirms the contemplative character of Han's Sabbath, seeing it as a counterpoint to the growing restlessness that defines modernity in his time. In *Human, All Too Human*, he likened this restlessness to 'swarm about like wasps and bees' and 'seasons followed each other too quickly', which brings modern civilisation into a new kind of barbarism (Nietzsche 2024, 173).

From a dialectical perspective, rest and struggle may appear as opposing forces trapped in constant conflict, producing the opposition between mediocrity and excellence. The conjunction between Han's Sabbath and Nietzsche's Dionysian tragedy suggests that these forces are not opposites, but rather intensities capable of actively enforcing organic growth. They emerge as two among the multiple possible ways human life can affirm itself through rest and struggle beyond the reactive structures of neoliberalism. Our real task now is not to choose between rest and struggle, but to actively create the conditions under which each may arise actively, as well as simultaneously. Creating such conditions, *i.e.* territories that transform subjugated spaces into means through which active forces may flow, will allow us to finally breathe according to the rhythm of the world.

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