

From Untruth to Dystopia: Nietzsche and Vonnegut on the Construction of Truth

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Abstract

This paper examines Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" and "2 B R 0 2 B" through Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "untruth as the condition of life." Nietzsche challenges the conventional understanding of truth by arguing that human beings depend upon socially constructed concepts, conventions, and systems of knowledge to make existence intelligible and sustainable. Vonnegut's dystopian short stories extend this philosophical concern into the social and political sphere by depicting societies in which such constructed truths become institutionalised and enforced as unquestionable principles. In "Harrison Bergeron," the ideal of equality is transformed into a mechanism for suppressing individual difference, while in "2 B R 0 2 B," population control reduces birth and death to regulated numerical exchanges in the name of collective welfare. Through these dystopian structures, Vonnegut reveals the contradiction inherent in life-preserving ideals when they become instruments of state control. The paper argues that Vonnegut does not merely illustrate Nietzsche's understanding of untruth but develops it further by demonstrating the political consequences of treating socially constructed truths as absolute. The two stories consequently expose the tension between collective ideals and individual autonomy and demonstrate how systems created to preserve life can simultaneously produce forms of violence, conformity, and oppression.

Keywords: Nietzsche; Vonnegut; untruth; dystopia; social conventions; individual autonomy; state control.

Friedrich Nietzsche critically examines the conventional conception of "truth" in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and in his essay "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873), where rather than treating truth as an objective and eternally valid correspondence between language and reality, Nietzsche interrogates the human processes through which particular concepts, values, and systems of knowledge come to be accepted as truths. In "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," he questions the assumption that human intellect provides direct access to an objective reality. Human knowledge is mediated by language, concepts, and systems of representation; consequently, what we call "truth" cannot be understood as an entirely objective reflection of reality. Nietzsche therefore describes such truths as "untruths" or "false judgments" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 12). For Nietzsche, even the notions of good and evil are fabricated and have no metaphysical cornerstone — they are just guidelines we came up with based on what best promotes our own life and growth.

Kurt Vonnegut was an American writer who was famous for his critical reappropriation of the science fiction genre through his short stories. Vonnegut, who is famous for his satirical treatment of morality and social conventions invites comparison with Nietzsche. Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" is a futuristic dystopian short story where the decree of equality has been imposed upon human

civilization by the state. Perfection in terms of beauty and intelligence is seen as unfair, and the egalitarian state is prompted to take measures to ensure equality across the country. They manage to do so by installing devices that help them curate an average standard of beauty and intelligence among the individuals. The story revolves around Harrison Bergeron, a fourteen year old intelligent, rebellious and handsome child of Hazel and George Bergeron who poses a threat to the normative order of the society. Harrison protests as he finds himself a misfit amongst the crowd who does not allow his unique gifts, talents and physical attributes to be stifled in the name of equality, while his parents, George and Hazel never violate the established order; they find equality to be life affirming.

Vonnegut's another science fiction story — "2 B R 0 2 B" which is read as "to be, or not to be" from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a dystopian society where ageing has been controlled and individuals have indefinite lifespan. To maintain the estimated population of forty million, the number of births must correspond to the number of deaths, however, due to the indefinite lifespan of people, deaths happen only through voluntary means. The government has enforced an organisation called Federal Bureau of Termination which provides service to those who volunteer to die. Edward Wehling had his maternal grandfather volunteer for the government assisted-suicides for the birth

of his child, however Wehling is faced with a situation where his wife is about to give birth to triplets — - “The law said that no newborn child could survive unless the parents of the child could find someone who would volunteer to die. Triplets, if they were all to live, called for three volunteers” (6). Wehling eventually kills Dr Hitz, Leora Duncan and himself, making room for all of his three children. In doing so, Wehling enforces his free will as he commits the act of murder in a state where death happens only through voluntary means.

In both the stories we see how the coercive administrative forces which are emotionally detached from its subjects, confiscate the individuality of the masses by giving out the ostensible reason of safeguarding their larger social interests (i.e., in the name of egalitarianism or population control) and eventually intrude their lives. The protagonists suffer from psychological dilemmas and they choose to transgress the norms set by the law and the society. These norms are necessitated by their governments as they allow them a relatively better place to live in, making these norms/laws life affirming. This paper examines these dystopian societies through Nietzsche’s concept of “untruth as the condition of life,” arguing that socially constructed “truths” can become life-preserving mechanisms while simultaneously functioning as instruments of control. It further considers how the short-story form allows Vonnegut to expose the contradictions underlying these supposedly ideal societies. The paper argues that Vonnegut doesn't simply illustrate Nietzsche's concept of “untruth,” he dramatizes the political consequences of socially constructed truths once they become institutionalised.

NIETZSCHE’S “UNTRUTH AS THE CONDITION OF LIFE”

According to Nietzsche, “truths” are systems of knowledge which are encoded and decoded by human beings by the means of their will to truth¹. In the essay, Nietzsche goes on to declare the human intellect as arbitrary because it is only calculable by human beings and the entire world is not pivoted around it. He asserts that the secrets of human intellect are limited to the systems of language and expression which only the human being can have access to. Consequently, there is a lack of a firm ground on which we can base these truths. These truths expose us to a non-transcendental reality, therefore, they are “untruths” or “false judgements” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 12). This way human beings expand their scope of existence beyond the likes of animals who eat and sleep, and become someone

who is capable of creating and producing something, however, these so-called “truths” which sprout from human intellect have no mission to lead beyond human life. According to Nietzsche, they are fictional because they help man justify his existence and lend him the chief position within the hierarchy of animal species. The regulated form of intelligence, strength and beauty in Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” and reproduction activities in “2 B R 0 2 B” reflect the nietzschean idea of untruths becoming the condition of life. These untruths regulate our day to day life and we assume these false beliefs to be rooted in reality and necessary for existence.

Nick Curry in his essay “Become Who You Are: Vonnegut and Nietzsche on Becoming, Affirmation, and the Importance of Art” writes “both (Nietzsche and Vonnegut) attempt to portray the chaos inherent in human experience by shaking us out of our orderly way of viewing ourselves and the people around us” (2). As Vonnegut, in his numerous works has staunchly satirised the American dream and the utopian set of notions associated with it; in “2 B R 0 2 B” Vonnegut shows humanity trapped between the desire to preserve a sustainable society for present and future generations, and the moral dilemmas that arise from limiting how many people may be born in order to achieve this goal. Ideas such as life, death and equality are believed to be life-affirming principles, however when a society engineered to impose these principles as norms end up becoming mechanisms of control which violate individuality and autonomy of the subjects.

Vonnegut’s dystopian short story “Harrison Bergeron” is another such attempt at exposing the horrors which have the potential to unfold if total equality is enforced. In the modern secular discourse, the idea of equality is much revered because it offers the possibility of equal opportunity to the individuals to make the most of their lives and talents. Nietzsche’s project in the essay is to reveal shortcomings of truths that we employ in our day to day lives. He takes on the instance of language which is used to convey the reality of our feelings and emotions. For him, words are just vague approximations of reality in the form of metaphors. For instance, words like “marriage,” “education” or “love” are packed with multiple layers of meanings and can allude to different things to different people. Therefore, Nietzsche rejects language as a self-evident or definite tool of expression because “the correct perception (of a word/concept)—which would mean the adequate expression of an object in the subject—is a contradictory

¹ Will to Truth - The desire of human beings to seek objective, absolute truth.

impossibility” in the case of language (5). Yet we function within the bounds of a society which accepts a particular language as a means of expression and a refusal to grant it the necessary status would disrupt the order of the society. Just as language becomes a tool of expression and has been pronounced as a proper communication between individuals, the institution of equality helps to preserve and protect the interest of each human life.

Vonnegut and Nietzsche expose the inherent human need to establish the discourses of language and equality because they are life-preserving, yet these discourses are pronounced as “untruths” because these are constructed and not eternally grounded in reality. We need myths, fables, language, religion, illusions, etc, in order to function as people and as a species. In such a case, “truth” serves life, not the other way around, this is why untruth is the condition of life.

“WONDERFUL WORLD” OF DYSTOPIA

Nietzsche defines the establishment of truth as a peace pact that is created between people because they are social beings. As a part of their interactive exercise, people set social conventions which result in systems of knowledge which we start designating as “truths.” As a result, the people who follow these social conventions are those who speak truthfully while those who go against this social convention speak a lie. It is here in the story that Harrison Bergeron assumes the role of a liar because he refuses to obey the rules of the society whose ultimate goal was to ensure equality. Harrison is declared “abnormal” (2) by his parents because of his beauty and intelligence. He becomes the figure of the liar who “abuses the fixed conventions by arbitrary changes” and doing so results in “society will no longer trust him but exclude him” (“Truth and Lies in an Extra Moral Sense” 2). Harrison Bergeron along with the Ballerina is killed by the authoritarian forces; his radical act against the establishment makes him a perjurer. On the other hand, George Bergeron and Hazel Bergeron religiously believe in the notion of equality and are hostile to the damaging consequences if the reality of the truth is exposed. It is within this framework that Harrison Bergeron assumes the position of the “liar.” By refusing to obey the conventions through which his society defines equality, he challenges the “truth” upon which that society has been constructed. Nietzsche argues that the individual who violates established conventions risks social exclusion because society depends upon collective adherence to these conventions. Harrison’s rebellion therefore represents not merely an act of political resistance but a rejection of the socially constructed “truth” that equality must be maintained at all costs.

Dystopian societies are rooted in an assertion that the world they offer is a happy place, however such societies call for an interrogation as they legitimise certain behaviour as “truth.” The justification being that these actions, activity or behaviour relieved them from a problematic condition of the past. In “2BR02B” Dr Hitz asks Wehling —

“Would you like to go back to the good old days, when the population of the Earth was twenty billion—about to become forty billion, then eighty billion, then one hundred and sixty billion? Do you know what a drupelet is, Mr. Wehling?” said Hitz. ‘Without population control, human beings would now be packed on the surface of this old planet like drupelets on a blackberry! Think of it!’ (7)

Vonnegut in the story “2 B R 0 2 B” represents and satirises how the births, deaths and lives of most of the citizens are regulated by these overriding truths which are actually taking hold of their individuality. The reproductive activity is channelised through the whims of the government through ways analogous to sadistic practices to bring about uniformity. The painter becomes the central figure in the story as he paints “The Happy Garden of Life,” which is clearly meant to be a metaphor or an allegory for the society as a whole – “Everything was perfectly swell. There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars. All diseases were conquered. So was old age. Death, barring accidents, was an adventure for volunteers” (2).

Wehling, being in an extreme psychological dilemma, shoots himself, Dr. Hitz and Leora (a member of the Federal Bureau of Termination), thus legalising the lives of the triplets. Dr. Hitz and Leora undergo a repercussion of their own irrationality as they were active participants in the making of this dystopian world.

Vonnegut's view of a dystopian future through the central theme of a supreme government that restricts reproduction capacities of human beings is evident as we find characters having unbound faith in the norm. As a medical practitioner, Dr. Hitz is responsible for saving lives but he is the person who set up the first gas chamber in Chicago for the people to volunteer for death. Dr. Hitz, Leora Duncan and the mural painter make the case that population control has a utilitarian value. However, after Hitz and Duncan’s murder, the painter who is a mute spectator of the murder and has lived for more than two hundred years contemplates about life at large and realises the inextinguishable nature of death and that death can not be treated as a self-inducing, voluntary phenomenon. Unable to ensure a life in exchange

of his death, these thoughts drive the artist to death, though in obedience to his nation's law by volunteering in the Federal Bureau of Termination. He rings the Bureau for an appointment for assisted suicide and receives an automated response which is devoid of compassion for his life: "Thank you, sir," said the hostess. Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations." (4)

Like Harrison Bergeron, Wehling rejects the societal norm or the so-called "truth" of voluntary death. From a Nietzschean perspective, life and death can not be stabilised or negotiated with a mere exchange of numbers. Moreover, controlling natural processes like ageing and further trade off between life and death reveals the despair and disparity that lies behind all scientific experiments. With the Garden of Eden-like imagery, mural painting mirrors the government's attempts to turn the state into a beautiful and healthy place for future generations. In the end, the painter being an artist acknowledges the untruths imposed by the government and points to the "foul dropcloth" as the perfect representation of life and reality to him. The story reveals tendencies for a Nietzschean interpretation as the painter acknowledges that life is not the beautiful painting of organised colours but the dirty cloth with bits of mixed-up colours here and there that lie rotten on the floor.

In the essay, Nietzsche also questions the sovereignty of logic that is deemed as truth in our lives and posits logical assumptions as false judgements. The unceasing vigilance by the authoritarian government to ensure equality across the state in Vonnegut's short story is trying to express a similar concern. Equality in Nietzsche's opinion would be an unnatural human construct, and one should be able to recognize the desire to impose it is against the fundamental principles of reality. For Nietzsche, hierarchies are inherent to human species and raising the weak and lowering the powerful to the same level brings about a falsification of reality that harms the power dynamics of a society. Nietzsche's critique of egalitarianism provides another useful framework for reading Vonnegut's story. Rather than assuming that equality is an unquestionable moral good, Nietzsche interrogates the values and power relations through which such ideals are established. From this perspective, the enforced equality of "Harrison Bergeron" can be read as a socially constructed ideal that suppresses difference in the name of collective stability.

One story presents a dystopian futuristic world of total equality where standards of beauty, ugliness and intelligence are neutralised to promote an egalitarian worldview where no form of discrimination persists while

the other renders a highly idealistic view of a world where death through "war, famine, and disease" to be even less appealing than volunteering in Federal Bureau of Termination. The possibility of a "wonderful world" is denied to those who wish to transgress the set of norms and ideas of truths imposed by the society.

TRUTHS AS FICTIONAL DISCOURSES

Life can be mapped by a series of performances we carry out by participating in fictional discourses or "truths." Nietzsche finds religion, morals and language inadequate and limited to human perception. As a consequence, the so-called "truths" will invariably lack objectivity because their validity hinges exclusively on the fluctuating principles of human mental laws. In other words, the "truths" of human life are always shifting over a period of time, they are designed to make the world sensible and inhabitable. We give credit to unjust and false beliefs by assuming them to be true, however it should be remembered that we're conditioned to think of them as true. Nietzsche writes, "truths are illusions about which one has forgotten" – out of necessity and forgetfulness, the individual is made to accept these truths and he learns to suppress his intuitions ("Truth and Lies in an Extra Moral Sense" 3). One such truth is language. Language makes use of certain designations which unless not properly used would result in exclusion from society. A refusal to operate within this established normative order would cripple human beings — unable to act, unable to make decisions. Human beings have to believe in these untruths in order to advance through life and function as a member of society and failing to do so would make life a chaotic carnival — full of degrading acts, panic and death.

By writing "untruth as the condition of life" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 12), Nietzsche offers an active participation with these untruths and a more resolute response towards them for our survival. All dystopian stories have the element of normalisation of certain ideals, and it is due to the incongruous and imposing nature of these ideals that dissent arises. The dissenters are denied the right to live as opposed to those who hold onto the norms. In the figure of Bergeron and Wehling, we find a denial of the truth and life preserving elements as they infringe the basic structure of their societies. Hence, man finds the truths constructed out of his intellect as life preserving and anyone who does not employ it properly is a threat to the society, and is likely to be killed or banished as such has been the case in Vonnegut's stories. Through Harrison Bergeron and Edward Wehling, Vonnegut presents individuals who reject the supposedly self-evident truths of their societies. Harrison refuses to accept enforced equality as an unquestionable social good,

while Wehling rejects the idea that human life can be reduced to a numerical calculation in which one death must compensate for one birth. Their acts of resistance reveal the instability of the “truths” that sustain these dystopian systems.

Bényei describes Vonnegut's approach to science fiction as a form of reappropriation, through which the genre becomes a vehicle for examining social, political and philosophical concerns. Vonnegut adds a political and social dimension to Nietzsche's idea of “untruth as the condition of life” by demonstrating what happens when socially constructed truths become institutionalised and enforced by the state. While Nietzsche argues that human beings depend upon concepts, conventions, and illusions to make existence intelligible and sustainable, Vonnegut draws attention to the possibility that these life-preserving structures can become mechanisms of oppression. Thus, Vonnegut extends Nietzsche's philosophical interrogation of truth into the political sphere by revealing how the authority to define and enforce such truths can determine the conditions under which individuals are permitted to live. The two stories consequently suggest that the danger does not lie merely in the constructed nature of human truths, but in their transformation into absolute social principles that no longer permit individual resistance or alternative ways of understanding life. In this sense, Vonnegut's dystopias provide a literary enactment of Nietzsche's philosophical concerns while also exposing the political consequences of treating socially constructed “untruths” as unquestionable truths.

Ultimately, Vonnegut's “Harrison Bergeron” and “2 B R 0 2 B” demonstrate how socially constructed truths can acquire the authority of unquestionable principles. Equality, population control, scientific progress, and social stability appear to preserve life, yet their institutionalisation also produces forms of violence against individual autonomy. Nietzsche's concept of “untruth as the condition of life” helps illuminate this contradiction: human beings require systems of meaning and shared conventions to make social existence possible, but these same conventions can become oppressive when they are treated as absolute truths. Vonnegut's dystopian worlds expose the consequences of such absolutism by presenting societies in which the preservation of collective life comes at the cost of individual freedom. The stories therefore do not simply reject social order; rather, they invite readers to question the assumptions and values through which that order is constructed and maintained.

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