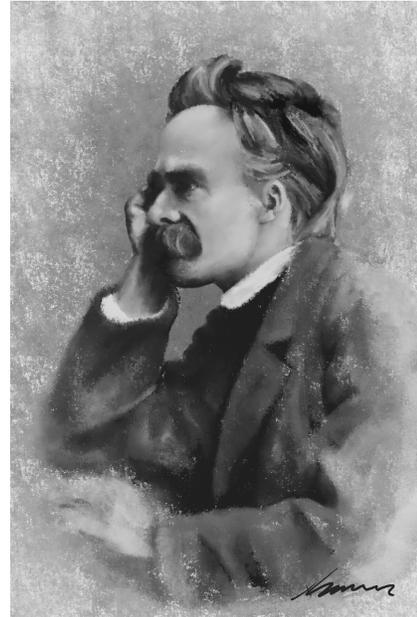


## How philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche would explain the boom in online learning during the 2020 pandemic

By Alexandra Simon

With the world stuck at home because of the global C-19 pandemic, there has been a large spike in how many people are going online to learn new skills. And when looking back to 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his book *Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche's thoughts on artists, disorder, and transformation can easily explain this increase in online learning.



“What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.”<sup>1</sup> This common phrase is a slight variation from the beginning pages of *Twilight of Idols*: “What does not destroy me, makes me stronger.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Nietzsche's most known philosophies and aims with his work is to promote life affirmation and discourage nihilism (thinking of life as meaningless). This is, Nietzsche thinks that we have to take what attempts to dispirit us, and affirm that it will make us better, rather than to succumb to it. In other words, to take this optimistic view.

“If there is to be art, if there is to be any aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological condition is indispensable: frenzy. Frenzy must first have enhanced the excitability of the whole machine; else there is no art.” – Nietzsche<sup>3</sup>

The most significant aspect of the C-19 pandemic is the fact that people are largely restricted to their homes to stay in quarantine. And so while the word “frenzy” often makes us imagine madness and chaos, socially distancing in this way is a sort of emotional and spiritual frenzy as humans are social creatures.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com. (n.d.). What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. Retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/what-doesnt-kill-you-makes-you-stronger/>

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). *Twilight of Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 467). Viking Press.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). *Twilight of Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 518). Viking Press.

But not to worry, as Nietzsche would put it, this C-19 frenzy may be *indispensable* to the artistic pandemic that has also occurred.

In the Washington Journal, the online learning service SkillShare shared that after C-19 and social distancing started most classes grew in students between 100% and 900% within February and March 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Resulting from social distancing, and confinement to our homes (for seven months as of writing this)—people become bored, lonely, and for many, a creative frenzy arises.

“What is essential in such frenzy is the feeling of increased strength and fullness. [...] A man in this state transforms things until they mirror his power - until they are reflections of his perfection. This *having to* transform into perfection is - art.”  
– Nietzsche<sup>5</sup>

What can be said then, is that a measurable amount of people today are picking themselves up by their bootstraps and learning new skills, improving on old ones, or teaching the world the skills they have. While still staying within the comfort of their homes, people are still trying to be active, creative, and optimistic toward social distancing.

Before C-19, most of us would often spend time at work, school, or hanging out at houses where we would socialize and bask in other people. Social distancing, quarantine, lockdown, however you call it, has two major components: local- and social-lacking. Meaning, we cannot really go anywhere, and we cannot really talk to anyone in-person. Which leaves us to stay inside all day, everyday, to entertain ourselves.

And therefore you get a lot of titles like “10 Skillshare Art Classes to Keep You Busy at Home While Social Distancing”<sup>6</sup> There are other online services for learning and all of them have become rational sources for balancing the order and disorder caused by C-19. And this balancing of the frenzy is the “essential”, the “*having to*”, that Nietzsche was referring to, it is what gives us our strength.

Another famous philosophy of Nietzsche’s is his Master and Slave Morality. Are we Masters or are we Slaves to values and morals (rules, thoughts, even religion)? Or, are we in a cycle of

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<sup>4</sup> Olson, P. (2020, May 21). Coronavirus Lockdowns Spark Boom in Online Learning for Adults, Too. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-lockdowns-spark-boom-in-home-schooling-for-grown-ups-11590053401>

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). Twilight of Idols. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 518). Viking Press.

<sup>6</sup> Taggart, E. (2020, April 30). 10 Skillshare Art Classes to Keep You Busy at Home While Social Distancing. Retrieved from <https://mymodernmet.com/skillshare-art-classes/>

counteracting oppression and freedom? This would be then Nietzsche's "Superman", the ideal man.

When applying this to his thoughts on art and to the C-19 pandemic: Social distancing is a sort of oppression and control over society, while art is a route toward an optimistic transformation of the situation.

For those taking online classes to broaden or deepen their horizons, one could strongly argue, are Nietzsche's ideal men, his Supermen. To express one's freedom to control frenzy is an act of Master Morality. And the "essential [...] feeling of increased strength," to Nietzsche, would only occur within those able to express Master Morality.

"Oppression" may not exactly come to mind, but for the sake of our health, C-19 itself has become the oppressor when it comes to this frenzy. Consequently, as we are still under lockdown and confined to our homes, the cycle of counteracting oppression and freedom, *Supermen*, is alive and well today.

In regards to Nietzsche's Slave Morality, he also writes on anti-artists in *Twilight of Idols*, which can also be applied to those not taking online learning classes.

"Anti-artistry [is] a mode of being which would impoverish all things, making them thin and consumptive [...] people who are starved by life and must of necessity grab things, eat them out, and make them more meager." – Nietzsche<sup>7</sup>

When artists are inspired, all they need is food and art.<sup>8</sup> Whereas, when the non-artist is in need of satisfaction, all they need is everything, to exhaust everything. Nietzsche would say that the artist is affirming life and finding meaning in it by attempting to control the frenzy. Whereas, the non-artist is the nihilist that finds no meaning in life, and is a Slave to preset morals upon how to control frenzy.

Nietzsche often writes on opposites in his philosophies. For this reason, it would be justified to compare those who watch educational videos to those who watch entertainment videos. As learning often causes the mind to switch from passive to active while watching something, education and entertainment seem like natural opposites.

To make more sense to the quote above, non-artists consume as much entertainment as humanly possible to satisfy themselves. And what is unfortunate in our day in age, is that entertainment

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). *Twilight of Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 519). Viking Press.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). *Twilight of Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 468). Viking Press.

cannot be exhausted, there is an uncountable, nearly infinite, amount of television shows, books, movies, Youtube videos available and thus an inexhaustible thing to make “thin” or “meager”.

“Art is the great stimulus of life.” – Nietzsche<sup>9</sup>

Pointing our energy in the right direction, to Nietzsche and many others, would be toward art, learning new skills, and transforming frenzy into something meaningful. On account of this, many people are turning into their own sort of Supermen as there is nothing else to do but watch TV. And so, with the rapid growth in online learning, the C-19 pandemic has become a pivotal moment of change for the better for a great number of people.

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<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Kaufmann, W. (1982). Twilight of Idols. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (p. 529). Viking Press.