Monica Lin

Professor Tunç Sen

Masterpieces of Western Philosophy

8 May 2019

The Philosophy of *Fight Club*: Tyler Durden as the Embodiment of Nietzsche's Morality

"The first rule of 'Fight Club' is – you don't talk about 'Fight Club'" (Fincher). This infamous quote is from the film, *Fight Club*, but to keep quiet about it would be a shame because it is rich with philosophical value to be discussed. To summarize the movie, a depressed man, otherwise known as a nameless narrator, suffers from insomnia and ennui with life. He meets a strange soap salesman named Tyler Durden who lives in a squalid house, eventually moving in with him after his materialistic, perfect apartment is blown up. The two men enjoy fighting and create what is known as the 'Fight Club,' an underground club with strict rules where men fight other men who are also sick of their mundane existences. Along the way, a woman named Marla attracts the narrator's attention, but for the most part, he does everything with Tyler, and their 'Fight Club' grows incredibly large and influential.

Interestingly, the film draws heavily from Nietzsche's philosophy as delineated in *On the Genealogy of Morals,* drawing from the concepts of 'life-affirmation' and severe challenges regarding established social and moral doctrines. Most of these ideas manifest themselves in Tyler, who represents not only the uprising of a 'slave morality' that will overturn societal values and recalibrate both society and morality, but also a physical manifestation of the inward desires of man, whether that be the want of inflicting suffering, engaging in indulgences, or displaying inhibited, animalistic tendencies. Tyler, though, also represents the hope that the narrator will

eventually achieve affirmation and happiness with life, constantly pushing the narrator towards accepting reality for what it is, including all its pains and pleasures.

In *Fight Club,* Tyler appears to be the physical manifestation of the leader of a "slave morality" that has defined "good" to suit its agenda of desiring to dismantle consumerism and the 'masters' at its head. According to Nietzsche, morality has no meaning and is inherently neither good nor bad (Nietzsche, 25). In the beginning, the 'nobles,' who were society's rich and powerful, decided that they embodied goodness, using their status to solidify this perspective. The traits that delineated goodness' association with nobility were rooted in power, beauty, and happiness; Nietzsche calls this 'master morality' (34). Contrarily, the Jews of society were sick of their "lowly place," and vowed to turn these perceptions around, deciding that their "wretchedness made them good," that "the poor, important, lowly alone are the good" (34). Fueled by *ressentiment* – a psychological state arising from suppressed sentiments of envy and hatred – the 'slaves' cultivated their emotions into creative violence, branding what was external to them as 'evil' and then turning the definition 'good' towards themselves (36-37). This entire dynamic regarding morality is reflected in the film, but instead of the qualities of truth, power, and beauty, the societal 'masters' in *Fight Club* are those who have succumbed deeply to consumerism; the 'slaves,' then, represent restraining from pleasures and materialism.

This contrasting dynamic is first established in a scene discussing Tyler's jobs, one of which was being a "banquet waiter at the luxurious Pressman Hotel" where Tyler commits acts like urinating in soup, acting as a "guerrilla terrorist of the food service industry" and its consumers, who are the "rich" 'masters' of society (Fincher). The 'slave morality' that Tyler champions results from that inward movement that Nietzsche mentions: the principles that Tyler believes in are a direct consequence of his hatred for consumerism; to define the club members'

identities, he uses negatives to claim, “You are not your job, or how much money you have in the bank” (Fincher), exhibiting that their value of goodness is not inherent but rather, derives its meaning from the baseness of ‘masters.’ Additionally, Nietzsche believes that ‘slave morality’ was forged in a sweaty, smelly hole full of hatred and muttering (Nietzsche, 47-48); Tyler forges his ‘slave morality,’ in a similar manner: his club’s members chant that they are “the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world” while they make explosives in a run-down, smelly house that represents the antithesis of luxurious materialism (Fincher). Tyler, then, successfully trains a minority to overthrow the majority through the violent process of bombing consumerist institutions. This final manifestation of Tyler’s ‘Fight Club’ becomes known as Project Mayhem, and it blames the strong for all suffering, advocating for a set of beliefs grounded in self-restraint and moderation (Nietzsche, 135-137). In the end, Project Mayhem is mostly successful: all of the city’s big credit corporations are detonated, allowing for ‘slave morality’ to rise to the top.

This destruction of credit corporations, though, is more than just a victory – it is also an erasure and equalization of debt, a return to “ground zero,” as the narrator calls it (Fincher). This reflects another theme of Nietzsche’s: the relationship between debtor and creditor; he states that in the past, if creditors could not have the pleasure of getting their money back, then they could have the pleasure of harming their debtors (Nietzsche, 70-71). This leads to Nietzsche’s conclusion that at one time in the past, making others suffer was considered a great joy, but now, suffering is viewed as a great argument against life (65-66). Though people derive pleasure from suffering, Nietzsche states that suffering and suffering’s modern counterpart – punishment – did not give rise to ‘bad conscience’ (81-82). Instead, he argues that it arose from the transition from hunter-gatherer societies into permanent societies; an undoubtedly violent process, it suppressed the instincts of hunting, cruelty, hostility, and destruction that characterized our pre-historic lives

(84-85). As a result, we turned this violence from the outside inwards, thereby birthing a 'bad conscience' and creating an inner life (86-90). This essentially waged a war against our own instincts – a tribulation of "man's suffering *of man, of himself"* (85). Nietzsche pulls religion into his argument, stating that 'bad conscience,' self-torture, and guilt are perfectly in line with 'slave morality' and Christianity's God (93-94).

Nietzsche's notion of the enjoyment of suffering manifests interestingly in the film, with the 'Fight Club' itself as the epitome of such a spectacle of suffering. The first time that Tyler punches the narrator without reason, the narrator says that it really hurts, pauses for a moment, and then demands, "Hit me again" (Fincher). Fighting, then, becomes an outlet, allowing the narrator to feel good and "deal with anything," and the narrator was not the only one who believed this (Fincher). Many men joined, increasing the group's size from some to many to thousands of members across the country. During the club's sessions, there would only be one fight at a time; all the other men would watch, with Tyler at their helm, acting like a God so that no suffering would go unnoticed. Though Nietzsche does not specifically state this, the members of the club *enjoyed suffering* as much as they enjoyed inflicting it. This is a deviation from societal norms as both Nietzsche and Tyler agree that people want to avoid suffering at all costs. When Tyler gives an assignment to club members that involves picking a fight with a random stranger, he notes that people will do anything, even when physically confronted, to avoid a fight (Fincher). Interestingly enough, the viewers eventually learn that Tyler is an imaginary projection of the narrator's unconscious, and that throughout the entire film, he's actually been the one fighting and hurting himself. This parallels the notion of a 'bad conscience' as something that exists to punish us, referencing Nietzsche's claim that what cannot be released outwardly must be turned inward. This fighting and suffering can be seen as the exposition of the narrator's

secret desires; it begins with the want to suffer and inflict suffering, which Nietzsche states is primitive. Tyler is a reflection of more than just this, though: he also embodies the deep, instinctive, and unconscious desires of man, claiming, "All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look… I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not" (Fincher).

Tyler, then, also comes to represent 'life-affirmation' and a denial of the ascetic ideal as he champions indulging in one's passions. To understand Nietzsche's definition of 'life-affirmation,' one must understand Schopenhauer's life philosophy. Schopenhauer believes that there is no purpose or meaning in life, resulting in a hedonism that should be denied. He decides, then, that the best fate is to never have been born at all; if we have already been born, then we should die quickly (Wicks, "Arthur Schopenhauer"). His ideas are grounded in ascetism, which is the denial of pleasures and impulses, believing in the greater value of abstinence as it adheres to spirituality and higher meaning. Nietzsche abhors Schopenhauer's idea of life, arguing that ascetism is the solution for those with "degenerating [lives]" (Nietzsche, 112-114); they have no control, so it's only natural that they would "rather will *nothingness* than *not* will" (97). In contrast, he favors 'life-affirmation,' which, if achieved, will grant one strength, spirit, and the will to power. 'Life-affirmation' is seeing life for what it truly is and accepting it (120).

Most of the characters in the film represent Schopenhauer's philosophy, from those dying in support groups to Marla, who especially embodies his ideal. The narrator says of Marla, "[her] philosophy of life… was that she could die at any moment. The tragedy of her life was that she didn't," perfectly representing Schopenhauer's beliefs (Fincher). The narrator himself also represents a denial of life; he has bought into consumerism, has a boring, meaningless job, and even consciously refrains from sex with Marla (Fincher). Tyler, conversely, is the manifestation

of ‘life-affirmation’ – the driving force that pushes the narrator towards accepting life. He embodies the opposite of the ascetic ideal and indulges in pleasure; he is the inward, subconscious manifestation of everything that the narrator wishes he could be, and thereby, the narrator’s solution to his own ascetism. The first manifestation of this notion occurs during a scene in which Tyler gives the narrator a chemical burn, using lye to inflict upon him the worst pain that he will ever know (Fincher). The narrator attempts to cower from the pain, but Tyler forces him to focus on it so that he can fight hard to face the pain and embrace the suffering, eventually succumbing it, accepting it, and agreeing to it (Fincher). This accepting of pain is equivalent to allowing Tyler take control, moving the narrator further along the path to life-affirmation.

Tyler tests him again when he threatens to crash a car that he and the narrator are in. Tyler asks him, “If you died right now, how would you feel about your life?” to which he responds that he would feel nothing (Fincher). Evidently, the narrator hasn’t yet achieved an affirmation of life because he exclaims that he’s sick of everything before Tyler shouts in response, “Hitting bottom isn’t a weekend retreat… Only after you’ve lost everything are you free to do anything! You see, you listen, but you don’t get it! You have to forget everything you know, everything you think you know!” right before Tyler crashes into another car (Fincher). As this chaos unfolds, a viewer familiar with Nietzsche would understand that the only correct answer to Tyler’s original question is that one must feel good about their life, changing nothing about it or having no problem with reliving it over and over again. “Hitting bottom” is Tyler’s equivalent of Nietzsche’s notion of seeing reality for what it is before one can affirm and accept life. The entire film, then, can be seen as an attempt for the narrator to embrace life and reach ‘life-affirmation’; anything else, according to Nietzsche, would be a negation of life.

In the final scene of the movie, the narrator and Marla are standing next to one another on the top floor of a corporate building. He reaches for Marla's hand as an explosion occurs, and half the skyscrapers against the skyline detonate, creating flashes of light and clouds of rubble. In this moment, 'ground zero' is achieved and 'master morality' is overthrown. Moreover, right before this, the narrator murdered Tyler by shooting himself in the lower jaw. Inflicting this blow on himself seemed to be some final form of fearful suffering, allowing him to overcome that manifestation of his inward desires and violence that was Tyler Durden. Lastly, the narrator gets to hold the hand of someone he deeply cares for; I believe that this moment represents his discovery of 'life-affirmation,' for Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, states that 'life-affirmation' is found "if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* 532). He continues, stating that "all eternity was needed to produce this one event – and in this single moment of affirmation, all eternity [is] called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed," essentially making life livable and lovable (532). In the end, then, Nietzsche's moral philosophy prevails: 'good' has been redefined and the narrator understands what it means to find the affirmation of life and no longer fear death – two great feats indeed.

Works Cited

Fincher, David. *Fight Club.* Performance by Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, 20th Century Fox, 21 Sep. 1999. *Amazon Prime.*

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Edited by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1989.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Edited by Walter Kaufmann. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1968.

Wicks, Robert. "Arthur Schopenhauer." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 12 May 2003, plato.stanford.edu/cgibin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=schopenhauer.