

Critically evaluate Nietzsche's critique of traditional Western ethical traditions. Does Nietzsche offer a viable alternative?

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Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900) was the child of strict Lutheran Christians from the city of Leipzig, in the then Prussian state of Saxony. Having experienced the loss of his father and younger brother while still very young, he moved to live with his mothers' extended family, where he was raised under the expectation of following in his fathers' footsteps and becoming a pastor in the Lutheran Church. It is therefore with a degree of irony that we discover how the adult Nietzsche conducted his academic career. Nietzsche's main preoccupation centred on the nature of morality and ethics. He had deep trouble with the predominant vein of ethical tradition in the Occident, which is at core of Platonic and Christian origin. Indeed, he believed that these traditions, at core, consisted of 'a dark, insidious nihilism.' (Rollins, 2004) As we explore and critically evaluate Nietzsche's appraisal of traditional Western ethics, it will be useful to begin by recounting a portion of a certain Greek myth. The point of this myth centres on the different responses of the gods Apollo and Dionysus to the wisdom of the demon Silenus, which was reluctantly divulged to King Midas. Nietzsche himself used this myth to illustrate a kind of polarisation that occurred in the history of the genealogy of morality, one side of which went on to manifest itself in the predominant Platonic/Christian vein of morality. (1967: 52)

'When Silenus finally fell into his hands, the king asked him what is the very best and most preferable of all things for man. The stiff and motionless daemon refused to speak; until, forced by the king, he finally burst into a shrill laughter and uttered the following words: 'Miserable ephemeral race, children of chance and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it is best for you not to hear? The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born,

not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best thing for you is – to meet an early death.’ (Rollins, 2004)

As Rollins helpfully summarises, Apollo, the God of order and reason refused to accept this wisdom, offering as an alternative, ‘the dream-like state of being that was built upon the foundation of rational understanding.’ (2004) Dionysus on the other hand, accepted this wisdom and his followers consequently pursued a life of indulgence and revelry. The first response, of Apollo, is said to have been motivated by fear and reluctance to embrace the uncertainty and ultimate pointlessness of life. Nietzsche claims this thinking is evident in the work of Plato, as he constructed systems of rational thought on subjects as wide ranging as politics, ethics, metaphysics and epistemology. For Nietzsche, Dionysus responded more appropriately and courageously, by accepting that there was no ultimate meaning in life, and instead embracing the fate of ‘chance and toil’. The idea of truth, as Rollins says, had been placed in to question. (2004)

Nietzsche distinguishes between what he calls philosophical labourers and genuine philosophers. Philosophical labourers ‘overpower the past’ (Beyond Good and Evil, 1998: 105), or treat history in such a way that it justifies their particular system of beliefs. Nietzsche believed them to be outright liars and manipulators of history, attempting to create an abstract idea of truth that was seemingly objective and authoritative and therefore real. On the other hand, genuine philosophers are “... commanders and legislators.” (Beyond Good and Evil, 1998: 105) Instead of attempting to appear objective in their manipulations of the past, genuine philosophers create humankind’s future, in an obviously subjective and creative kind of way, by means of revaluating all values. Genuine philosophers are creative geniuses. Nietzsche saw Plato in such a light. As Lampert says, he ‘... afforded himself the right to lie, to lie morally for what he took to be the good of his people.’ (2004: 206) For Nietzsche it is the task of genuine philosophers to lay bear the deception of Platonism

and create new philosophical grounds, of the same 'scope and influence' as Plato's, for a new moral foundation of society. (Bishop, 2004: 209) So, while praising Plato for his creative genius, and his ability to reinterpret history, Nietzsche perceived that his philosophy was borne out of a fear of the random, pointlessness of the universe. He lays the blame for an over emphasis upon an Apollonian point of view in Plato at the feet Socrates, whom he describes as the corrupter of youth. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 23) In contrast to this Apollonian angle in Plato, Nietzsche asserts that morality is, in its totality, a social construction, and is in no way the inevitable out-working of essential character traits of the human nature, or of ultimate reality. He advocates the development of personal moralities for the individual. This is indicative of his rejection of dogmatism in all its forms, particularly the Platonic-Christian dogmatism of his youth. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 23) Inherent in this critique, is the theme of perspectivism, which permeates Nietzsche's writing. It is an insistence upon the subjective nature of all philosophies, of morality or otherwise. He calls it 'that fundamental condition of all life'. (1998: 4) As he says in the preface of 'Beyond Good and Evil', '... of all errors thus far, the most grievous, protracted, and dangerous has been a dogmatist's error: Plato's invention of pure spirit and transcendental goodness.' (1998: 3) Because Christianity (as popularly conceived by mainstream Church movements) has a dogmatic understanding of truth, Nietzsche deems that it is at core nihilistic. The idea of reality it portrayed to him was one of stagnant, gridlocked inertia, as opposed to a vibrant and organic, changeful reality, that although slippery and transient, promoted life and heterogeneity. Very much related to this is the distinction in Plato's work between appearance and reality. Appearance, he conceded was in a constant state of flux, but that flux merely masked a deeper reality, the reality of 'the forms', which 'belong to the realm of unchanging existence'. (MacIntyre, 1966: 42) These forms provided the blueprints, so to speak, for all of the earthly realities we experience daily - for appearance. Nietzsche in contrast, holding a more Dionysian perspective, held that the flux of existence 'revealed to us a truth that was itself changing and becoming.' (Rollins, 2004)

At the heart of Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality, lies his belief that it was developed from the base motivation of what he called *ressentiment*. He shows how this bias developed in the context of ancient priestly nations, such as the Jewish nation, and characterises it as one side of a polarisation between a 'slave' morality and a 'master' morality. (1989: 26, 27) He imagined the beginning of civilisation in a fictional setting where the early humans, or proto-humans, were seen as having a "semi-animal" consciousness (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 105), acting only out of their basic impulses and internal drives. Over time there evolved two groups, or social strata: the master race, who were smaller numerically but held the power, and the slave race, who were by far the larger group, but were successfully subdued by the master race. The slaves underwent an extensive reshaping of their minds during this time, due to the redirection of the natural instincts and drives that had been suppressed by the master race. Out of this transformation evolved 'conscience', mainly in the form of a bad conscience. The 'bad-ness' of their conscience found its genesis in the deep hatred and *ressentiment* the slaves held for the master race. Out of a need to appease this bad-conscience and lay blame for it, evolved, as a mere social-construction, the identification of a demon. Out of the fear of the demon, evolved the need for the identification of one that could protect against it, namely, God. In such a way, Nietzsche argues that the divine being, specifically the Judeo-Christian God, is not only in reality a social construct and therefore not real, but the poisonous fruit of *ressentiment*, which he saw as essentially 'hostile to human life'. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 105) In the following quote, we really get a sense for Nietzsche's distaste for Christianity, and for how pervasive, in his opinion, its influence has been: 'I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great innermost corruption, the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means is poisonous, stealthy, subterranean, *small* enough - I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.' (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 56)

Not only does Nietzsche deem the seedbed of *ressentiment* within Christianity to be toxic to human well being, but he is incensed with how, in its all-pervasiveness within the Occident, it has discriminated against all that is strong, powerful, prideful and heroic. As a consequence to the basic emotion of *ressentiment*, come lust for power and revenge which, ostensibly, the slave race executed successfully upon the master race by means of the revaluation of values. In *The Genealogy of Morals* he describes how the Jewish race 'reject[ed] the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed)', and motivated by hatred for the master race and a deep desire to overthrow them, 'ventured, with awe-inspiring consistency, to bring about a reversal' [of values]. 'Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone, whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned.' (1989: 34) In this long and drawn-out way and with great patience and determination, priestly nations such as the Jewish nation, were able to dethrone the masters of the world, to take revenge upon them and, ultimately, gain power for themselves. Nietzsche saw Jesus Christ, not as a critique of love and forgiveness against such values of *ressentiment*, but as the climax and full realisation of them. (1989: 35) In contrast, he characterised the 'noble mode of valuation' as 'act[ing] and grow[ing] spontaneously'; as 'affirming itself gratefully and triumphantly'; as having a 'positive basic concept' in which the individual themselves were the arbiters of goodness: "we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones." (1989: 37) Nietzsche looks with disgust upon the Christian values of humility and self-abasement, citing their genesis in the 'ascetic ideal'. This, he says, is the favoured 'instrument of power' for those who 'see themselves as "too good" for this world...' (1989: 97)

May gives a very helpful summary of the specific character traits that Nietzsche would reject in a morality. These include: The idea that good is necessarily embodied by any

specific character traits; the idea that such values are 'unconditionally valid'; any system of morality which has been born out of *ressentiment*; a system of morals which has as core tenets the character traits of guilt and bad-conscience, which are the 'principal means of enforcing slave morality'; a concept of 'free will' that separates the individual from their actions, thus enabling a person to be guilty of wrong-doing in the essence of their being, not merely in specific actions; and the 'ascetic ideal' which paves the way psychologically for the permanent residence of *ressentiment* within the psyche.' (1999: 104)

In terms of the alternative to the Western ethical tradition offered by Nietzsche, a superficial read of his work will uncover much talk of 'creating new values', however, it will prove impossible to discover anything of real substance here. Indeed, Solomon says, 'What is it to 'create a value'? Not even Nietzsche suggests one - not even one!' (2004: 69) Emmanuel Kant, Nietzsche's favourite target within the field of philosophical morality, had developed an abstract philosophical system for a morality that was already firmly established as practice - the Platonic/Christian morality. As apt as Nietzsche's critique of this abstract system and its practical foundation was, his alternative would never be able to take root in a practical way, due to a number of factors. Firstly and simply, the all-pervasiveness of the Platonic-Christian scheme within culture. In other words, there was a lack of conducive context: 'Dionysus, like "the crucified" is an ideal only within a context ...'. (Solomon, 2004: 59, 63) So, Nietzsche had no context suitable for the germination of his thought, and further to that Solomon suggests he made a fundamental error, one that all philosophical moralists are guilty of: 'the rejection of ethos as the foundation of morality and a compensating insistence on the rational justification of morality'. (2004: 64) In other words, Nietzsche's preferred morality was rationally formulated and justified and did not emanate from a presupposed *ethos* already established. As we have already said, one of his main contributions to the study of ethics was the importance of perspective, and how totalising meta-discourses of ethics, such as Kant's Categorical Imperative,

always do violence to the individuality and creativity of people. However, he does not apply this principle in the development of practical applications of his 'ethics of virtue' (Solomon, 2004: 64) and fails to acknowledge the peculiarity of any morality to a locality with a presupposed *ethos*. Thus, Solomon was able to say: 'Aristotle has an *ethos*: Nietzsche leaves us with nothing.' (2004: 63)

While largely agreeing with Nietzsche's decimation of meta-ethical discourses, it seems that he has at times glossed over certain aspects of established morality, particularly Christian morality, in his attempt to revolutionise, to speed up our realisation that 'God is Dead'. (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 1997: 5) Indeed, Salaquarda comments that his understanding of Christianity is at times problematic and in need of correction. (1996: 107) For example, the practical application of the biblical concept of loving one's neighbour need not be legislated on a meta-ethical level, but rather as a transferable principle with radically different manifestations in each application. The recurring theme of the perspectivism in Nietzsche's thought is both a celebration of the creative potential in human beings, and a guard against the discriminatory character of all dogmatic discourse. Solomon states this is '... what is most urgent and cleansing in Nietzsche, the attack on the transcendental pretension of understanding the world "in itself" on the basis of our own limited and limiting moral experience.' (2004: 56) It could be argued, (although perhaps not by many of those from within the church structures) that Christianity is in fact very transferable between cultures and ethical systems. Indeed it is probably for this reason that it has experienced such longevity. 'The successive expression of the forms of life of Hebraic tribalism, Hellenistic monarchy, the Roman Imperial proletariat, Constantinian bureaucrats, and the long list of their successors results in a theology which can accommodate a wide range of views in ethics.' (MacIntyre, 1968: 111) The thought will occur to the reader that Nietzsche has perhaps been a tad hasty in this respect, but they will also remember the seemingly oppressive and stifling environment in which he was raised, and therefore rightly indulge him.

Nietzsche's alternative to the Western tradition of ethics is neatly summed up in the subtitle to his one of his very last works, *Ecce Homo: 'How One Becomes What One Is'*. May cites the idea of 'life-enhancement' as Nietzsche's prized tool in the task of becoming what one is, and gives three specific characteristics essential to its realisation. Firstly, it will include anything that enhances the power of the individual. Everything that weakens an individual is necessarily 'bad' by nature. As May points out, 'the phenomenology of power is essential to that self-reverence without which human-beings relapse into destructive resentment.' (1999: 27) Secondly, his new ethic requires the 'sublimation' of the will to power. This could also be described as the disciplining and honing of the raw instinctual drives of the nature to the greater end of creativity and the peaceful co-existence of competing drives. This contrast's distinctly with the 'ascetic ideal' that he claims would seek to crush or extirpate competing drives. The third and vital characteristic of the 'life-enhancement' ethic is that of 'form-creation'. May explicates this by saying that '... 'creation denotes neither arbitrary fiat nor conventional voluntarism, but rather expressive acts that arise out of willing the *necessity* of 'what one is'. ... In this sense Nietzsche equates creativity with 'freedom of the will' or 'necessity'. (1999: 30) Nietzsche seems to generally celebrate all that is organic, changeful, empowering, courageous, creative and indeed 'masterful' in life. He hates systems of thought that become so widely accepted by most people, that they are somehow reified to the point of becoming unquestionable. Again we see the pervasiveness of the Dionysian ethic in Nietzsche's thought, and perhaps gasp with a realisation of the unpredictable randomness of a world without objective truth, which he says, so beset Plato. Closely related to this is the 'love of fate', or *amor fati*, by which Nietzsche is advocating a love of one's life, with all of its imperfections. Given that the individual's perspective is paramount in Nietzsche's thought, this makes perfect sense. He challenges us to fully embrace the individual distinctiveness of our lives, and the randomness with which it unfolds. His doctrine of 'eternal recurrence' acts as a personal litmus test for the depth of ones 'love of fate', by challenging the

individual to arrive at a place of such deep satisfaction with their life, that they would happily re-experience the exact reality of it in eternal repetitions. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 36, 37)

Of key importance in Nietzsche's philosophy is its humanism. He places humanity at the top of the hierarchy and deposes any notion of God by placing the human body and the planet earth in the position of ultimate reverence. He seems to level the playing field, so to speak, so that man no longer has any moral legitimation other than his own self-informed and flexible conscience. However, he does not in fact advocate egalitarianism within society, preferring instead the rule of a few elite creative genius's, in an aristocratic-style of social organisation. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 43) In this way Nietzsche advocates an elitist, selective, hierarchical structure in society, one that favours the strong, ambitious and proud, or as he has it elsewhere, those that have adequate 'will to power'. In this way Nietzsche is advocating a 'master morality', indicative as he saw it of classical Greek and Roman rulers, as the alternative to the Judeo-Christian 'slave morality' so predominant in the Occident. It could be suggested that in this way he helped lay the philosophical foundations for the acceptance of Nazism. Solomon corrects us there however, making an important distinction in Nietzsche's thought between supremacy and superiority. 'The rejection of the bourgeois morality does not dictate cruelty but rather an emphasis on excellence.' (2004: 66) This is essentially related to Nietzsche's use of the concept of will to power, which comes to a climax in his talk of the 'over-man', or *ubermensch*. This is one of the most popular and enduring themes in Nietzsche's writings. As a concept, it is not fully explained, but rather briefly sketched. It's nature is best elucidated by distinguishing it from its antipode, that of the 'last man'. 'Such a person ... is quite literally incapable of the desire to create beyond oneself in any form, including that of having children'. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 40) Nietzsche describes the *ubermensch*, or superman, saying that he is, or will be to men, as men are to apes (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 1997: 6), hinting that the superman will be take some sort moral

evolutionary leap beyond that of normal men. The superman will be someone who honours the earthly over the (imaginary and therefore false) heavenly; he will be someone who glorifies the body over the soul; the chief sin, in the view of the superman, is to blaspheme the earth - not God, because God is dead. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 40) He does not however envisage all people aspiring to be 'over-men', on the contrary, evincing his elitist tendencies, he 'emphasises the importance of ... order of rank', claiming that 'the human species consists of a proliferation of types, some of which are more valuable than others. Of greatest importance for Nietzsche is the individual genius, on whom culture depends.' (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 48) Again we see what some have called the historical irresponsibility of Nietzsche, perhaps being naïve to the potential this kind of thought could have in the hands of the wrong person. Although, as we have seen Solomon reminds us, this would be, and undoubtedly has been, a misinterpretation. Instead he notes that without this elitism, 'the strong [are] limited by the weak, the productive limited by the unproductive, the creative limited by the uncreative'; ideally, it is simply the recognition that 'peoples talents and abilities differ.' (2004: 66)

Throughout this brief survey of Nietzsche's critique of traditional Western ethics, we have considered his thoughts about the fear within the Platonic tradition and the nature of the philosophical vocation; the *ressentiment* and nihilism within the Christian tradition; and we have seen, that while there is a definite and wonderful cleansing quality to Nietzsche's thought, he has at times glossed over aspects of the traditions he wished to jettison. Indeed, as regards Christianity, Salaquarda states that it cannot survive without reforming itself through an integration of his thought, but that 'not all kinds of Christian doctrine and practice are rendered impossible by his critique.' (1996: 91) We then considered in brief some of the alternative's offered by Nietzsche, such as the importance of perspectivism, *amor fati*, the doctrine of eternal recurrence, the over-man and the will to power. This was neatly summarised by May in what he called the life enhancement ethic. In criticism of Nietzsche we have seen how, as far

as creating new values are concerned, he came up empty handed due the rationalist nature of his justification and the failure, rather ironically, to see the importance of a presupposed *ethos*. In conclusion we may ask ourselves, "Is Nietzsche's alternative viable?" We have seen that Nietzsche in fact does not really offer a concrete alternative in terms of a system of morality; however he does leave us with the task of questioning everything received from previous generations, of doubting every 'truth', and of taking courage and forging ahead with the creation of new values which reflect the *ethos* of our time, whatever shape they may take.

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