



Philosophy and Culture in the Thought of Nietzsche

When I was a teenager, there was a guy from my old neighborhood who had developed an addiction to crack cocaine. Given that he didn't have much in the way of steady employment to support his habit, he acquired another: He became hooked on thievery.

Now before long, this junkie and thief was known by everyone for who and what he was, for there wasn't a single person among his family, friends, and acquaintances upon whom he didn't set his sights. He stole, or at least tried to steal, from everyone.

One night, he tried to steal from me.

As was our way, a group of us — including the junkie and thief — were gathered at our neighborhood park. He decided that it was about time for him to get high. Being without any cash of his own, he tried to prevail upon me to “lend” him some funds. When I refused, he persisted. “Don't be greedy,” he admonished me.

Don't be greedy.

My cousin is currently married to a good woman with whom he shares a nice home and two beautiful children. But before he met her, he was married for a brief time (not briefly enough) to another woman who wasn't all that good. On more than one occasion, she was unfaithful to him. He discovered her last indiscretion by either reading her diary or tracking her down, I don't recall which. The point, though, is this: When he confronted her, she castigated him for “violating her privacy.”

Both my selfish, dishonest friend and my cousin's selfish and dishonest ex-wife sought to cloak their selfishness and dishonesty behind a veil of objectivity. Both sought to advance their subjective interests by invoking the language of right and wrong: Greed is wrong, violating another's privacy is wrong, etc.

But it isn't just thieves and unfaithful spouses who seek refuge in the rhetoric of moral objectivity. This is the tried and true strategy of everyone. This, at any rate, is the verdict of the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche insisted that — the declarations of such venerable Western philosophers as Plato and Aristotle aside — human beings do not want happiness. The claim that they do want happiness is itself just another illustration of this universal predilection to advance one's interests without detection. The philosophers who posit happiness as man's ultimate end are guilty of deception, for their hearts' desire is that of every other.

What human beings ultimately want, Nietzsche tells us, is power. Things can't be otherwise, for “life is





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precisely Will to Power.” What this means is that in spite of “the disparaging purpose” with which “ages” have associated these activities, life is “appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation.” The Will to Power is nothing more or less than the Will to Life.

Our moralizing to the contrary notwithstanding, “‘exploitation’ does not belong to a depraved, or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the *nature* of the living being as a primary organic function; it is a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life.” [Emphasis in original.]

Nietzsche concedes that “as a theory,” this concept is “a novelty.” However, “as a reality it is the *fundamental fact* of all history.” [Emphasis in original.]

Upon canvassing the history of morals, two tolerably distinct visions of morality emerge. The one originated with aristocrats. Nietzsche calls this “the master-morality.” The other belonged to the masses. This he refers to as “the slave-morality.” The differences between the two couldn’t be more glaring.

The master-morality springs from “the noble type of man.” The latter is honest, brutally honest, inasmuch as he recognizes in himself the wellspring of all values. Seeing himself as a “creator” and “determiner” of worth, he looks to no one for self-affirmation. For the noble man, those things such as power, cunning, intelligence, hardness, and severity are deserving of honor because and only because he decrees them as such. The master-morality is the morality of “self-glorification.”

The slave-morality, in stark contrast, takes shape from “the resentment” of the masses of human beings who are too weak and too stupid to get along without the assistance of others — particularly the assistance of the aristocrats. It is designed to subvert the master scheme of value while advancing the interests of the masses.

Everything that is deemed “good” within the master-morality is regarded within the slave-morality as not just “bad,” but “evil.” Nietzsche writes that according to “the morality of resentment,” the evil man is none other than “the good man of the other morality.” The evil one is “the aristocrat, the powerful one, the one who rules” who has been “distorted by the venomous eye of resentfulness, into a new color, a new signification, a new appearance.”

The slave-morality affirms just those qualities that promise to alleviate its proponents’ suffering: “sympathy, the kind, helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility, and friendliness.” Because these are the characteristics that supply “the only means of supporting the burden of existence,” they are elevated to the stature of universal human excellences.

Nietzsche identifies two versions of slave-morality: Christianity and socialism. As we would expect from any species of the slave-morality, both promote altruism or selflessness — a “way of valuing” that arises from “a consciousness of the fact that one is botched and bungled.” This consciousness, in turn, engenders an aching need to assign blame for one’s condition.

In the case of the Christian, the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the botched himself, i.e. the sinner. The socialist, on the other hand, holds “society” responsible for his plight. Whatever their differences, though, it is “the instinct of revenge and resentment” that animates Christian and socialist alike.

Man, like every other type of living organism, strives to dominate his surroundings. Some forms of



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domination, like war, say, are overt. But even when we are not conquering one another via violence, we nevertheless continue the quest for domination through subtler means — such as invocations of objectivity. Appeals to Reason, the Bible, the will of God, Equality, Liberty, Truth, Justice, Natural Law, the Moral Law, the Principle of Utility, the Categorical Imperative, the Form of the Good, Natural Rights, Human Rights, Democracy, Happiness, and so forth and so on, are just some of the examples of the instruments that have been enlisted in the service of advancing partisan and individual interests. If Nietzsche is correct, these are smokescreens intended to hide that which drives every living thing: the Will to Power.

Even if there is much to criticize in Nietzsche's thought, there is also much from which to learn. He was a provocative and bold thinker who seldom fails to leave an indelible impact upon his readers.

Given the recent reelection of President Obama and his fellow partisans, this just might not be a bad time to acquaint ourselves with Nietzsche's writings. Socialist rhetoric is in the air, and the air is thick. Rather than be burdened with guilt (and taxes) for our "lack of compassion" for "the disadvantaged," we would be better served to call to mind Nietzsche's contention that the socialists (or welfare-statists or "liberals") among us are motivated first and foremost by their aching need for ever greater power.

To those who will object that this is too much to accept, Nietzsche responds bluntly and succinctly: "the truth is hard." Then, as if to scream from the top of his lungs, he implores us to be "honest towards ourselves!"



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