

Beyond Good and Evil

"Psychologists should bethink themselves before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength – life itself is Will to Power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results thereof."

"The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it: it is here, perhaps, that our new language sounds most strangely. The question is, how far an opinion is life-furthering, life-preserving, species-preserving."

In a nutshell

Human beings have a natural and healthy urge to be creative and powerful, and morality only suppresses and distorts this.

In a similar vein

Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (p 126)

Niccolò Machiavelli *The Prince* (p 190)

Arthur Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation* (p 274)

Slavoj Žižek *Living in the End Times* (p 306)

Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche saw the history of philosophy as an expression of the "will to Truth," yet this obsession with truth was simply an arbitrary prejudice. Why are philosophers not as interested in *untruth* or *uncertainty*, he wondered?

As he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "In spite of all the value which may belong to the true, the positive and the unselfish, it might be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life should generally be assigned to pretence, to the will to delusion, to selfishness and cupidity." Perhaps good and evil are more knitted together than we think, though (in the interests of purity) we like to see them as separate.

Good and evil are a creation of humankind: "There is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena." And if this is so, it frees us to live according to our natural wish to be more, have more, do more, not worrying too much about others. Selfishness, including evasion, distrust, and a love of dissembling and irony, Nietzsche says, is a sign of health – it is the people who are always after some pure and objective absolute (whether in religion or philosophy) who are the sick ones.

While the common reaction to reading Nietzsche is shock, there are few philosophers who can be more entertaining, or who carry the potential to really change your view of things. The list of people he influenced is long, and includes Sigmund Freud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Heidegger, W.B. Yeats, Sartre, and Foucault. Among contemporary philosophers, Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Slavoj Žižek, though very different in their content, borrow some of their free-flowing, idiosyncratic, subjective style from Nietzsche. His startling originality and emotion-charged, nontechnical prose could not be more different to today's dry, overspecialized academic writings.

After a promising early start (he became a philosophy professor at only 24), illness and a truly independent spirit saw Nietzsche fall outside the mainstream, and his dismissal of philosophy as an objective science allowed him to write in a brilliantly personal and often mad style. Though in *Beyond Good and Evil* some of the people or events he mentions are of his time and not so relevant to today, generally his insights – including how to view science and religion – seem very fresh.

Why "truth" in the first place?

Philosophers make an assumption that "the certain is worth more than the uncertain, that illusion is less valuable than 'truth,'" but such valuations, Nietzsche says, may only be superficial, necessary to a sense of self and part of our need to create a feeling of certainty for our very survival. We want to generate logical fictions in order to understand reality. He further argues that what most people see as conscious thinking is in fact mere instinct. We think much less than we would like to believe.

Philosophers too, though they see themselves as independent minds creating new systems of cold, objective logic, are most of the time merely spouting who and what they are; they are not machines generating truth, but rather defenders of a prejudice. Kant, for instance, fashioned the guise of a scientific philosopher to convey his moralistic "categorical imperative," but Nietzsche sees him as just another in a long line of "old moralists and ethical preachers." And Spinoza's wish to make his philosophy seem more scientific led him to clad it in a "hocus-pocus" mathematical format. In sum, philosophers are not lovers of wisdom, but lovers of *their* wisdom. At the heart of each of their worldviews is a moral position, and "knowledge" is the costume in which it is dressed. Yet Nietzsche admits that he is not the first to suggest such a thing; Epicurus, a down-to-earth ex-slave, also pointed out the grandiosity and vanity of philosophers such as Plato who presented apparently "self-evident" truths.

The will to power, and free will

Nietzsche thought that psychologists were wrong in saying that the strongest instinct in living things was for self-preservation or survival. Rather, their chief aim is to *discharge their strength*. This is his famous Will to Power (a concept in part derived from Schopenhauer's "Will"). In short, we want to keep living not for its own sake, but so that we can express our powers.

Given this, what Nietzsche has to say about free will is perhaps surprising, summed up in the statement:

"I shall never tire of emphasising a small, terse fact, namely, that a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish."

The idea of a self-willing ego is an assumption; it is more accurate to speak of things that "one" does rather than "I," because we are a complex of sensation, emotion, and thinking. The "strangest thing about the will," Nietzsche says, is that it is a mechanism that both gives orders and accepts them. We identify ourselves with the order-giver (what we call "I"), but in reality our body is "a social structure composed of many souls." We believe that our decisions

are the basis of our success, but this is like assuming that the ruler of a lance is alone responsible for outcomes, forgetting all the other factors involved. We are neither totally in control of what happens nor totally irresponsible. The truth lies in between, and the belief in pure free will, or what Nietzsche calls "intention-morality," should be put in the same category as astrology or alchemy.

But how do Nietzsche's thoughts on free will square with the Will to Power and indeed his concept of the *Übermensch* ("superman"), the sovereign actor who is free of all the usual moral conventions and ways of seeing? The answer is that Nietzsche believes that people think too much, when they should give free rein to their instinctive Will to create and dominate. The idea of free will is a Christian nicety based on a belief in the sanctity of every soul, when in fact a human is better seen as a higher animal that grasps what it wants from life. The nature of the *Übermensch* is not contemplating or rationalizing, but energetic doing and creating.

Science, philosophy, and the true philosopher

Nietzsche enjoys pointing out the hubris and insolence of science as claiming to be the only discipline that matters in the modern age, replacing both philosophy and religion. Philosophy is the "master-task," he asserts, supreme among all areas of learning. He despairs over modern philosophy's relinquishing of its noble role, specializing as a mere "theory of knowledge," for instance; and he is not surprised that the average person sees philosophy as having a rather downbeat face, while the countenance of science is happy and confident, claiming to be the measure of all things. In fact, he says, science explains little; it is merely a way of arranging the world according to human perception.

Nietzsche notes that it would be dangerous, revolutionary, for a modern philosopher to say that he is not a skeptic. The philosopher prefers instead to say that he knows nothing, or that nothing can be known. Yet skepticism is a "pleasing, lulling poppy" that comforts the user and makes him feel part of his world. This outlook comes about, Nietzsche says, through the person being an amalgam of different races and classes, in which nothing is stable and everything is relative. Everything is thought through, and nothing is done through pure Will. "Objectivity" and the "scientific spirit" are simply expressions of paralysis of the Will, a disease that spreads wherever civilization lasts longest. Nietzsche distinguishes between "philosophical workers" and "scientific men," on the one hand, and real philosophers on the other. Among philosophical workers he includes Kant and Hegel, who have sought to identify values and truths and put them in some order. But Nietzsche's real philosopher is a "commander and law-giver," a creator whose motto is "Thus shall it be!"

The conventional view of the philosopher is that he or she is wise, prudent, and lives apart from normal life. But Nietzsche draws an alternative picture: "the *genuine* philosopher ... lives 'unphilosophically' and 'unwisely', above all 'imprudently', and feels the obligation and burden of a hundred attempts and temptations of life - he risks *himself* constantly, he plays *this* bad game." Real philosophers should be "the bad conscience" of their time and culture, their job to apply a "vivisector's knife to the breast of the very virtues of their age."

In asking the question "Is greatness *possible*, nowadays?" Nietzsche must contend with the nature of modern society, which he says is "a general war against everything rare, strange, and privileged, against the higher man, the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, the creative plenipotence and lordliness." Above all, the modern person seeks a life free from fear or pain. This is a sad dereliction of our potential. Instead, we should be throwing ourselves into life at whatever risk, without getting permission for anything.

Slave morality and master morality

There is a natural hierarchy to humankind, a kind of natural justice. The "noble soul," Nietzsche says, does not like to look above for anything; it looks forward, or down, because "he knows that he is on a height." Nietzsche admits that this is the opposite of what many moralities and religions suggest - that we are fulfilled when we make ourselves *smaller* than others. This to him seems like fakery. Modern education and culture are about deception, trying to exalt the plebeian and mediocre at the cost of a true aristocracy of spirit.

Nietzsche despised democracy and notions of "equality of rights" and "sympathy with all sufferers," because he believed that this attempt to level the playing field robbed people of the conditions that could make them great. Oppression, poverty, violence, and severity of every kind carried the opportunity of making the mediocre into something substantial, as it called on their inventive powers, daring, and spirit.

He called Christianity a "slave morality" because it emphasized "the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit" and made the believer into a self-deriding shadow of what they could be. However, he admires the Old Testament as a great work of divine justice.

Morality was designed to make human beings seem simple and intelligible; if there are common rules, then we can all be judged the same way. But if we look beyond the usual categories of "good" and "evil," we can see people in their true light: having a natural belief in and reverence for themselves. And when people have to answer to us, this is as it should be. Rather than being some flight of vanity, power over others is simply a sign of the "noble soul."

Final comments

Nietzsche's disavowal of the traditional philosophical project - the search for fundamental truths - had a big influence on existentialism and also the deconstructionist philosophies. Unfortunately, his aversion to the "blending of races," as well as his disavowal of traditional morality and democratic ideals, made him ripe to be taken up by Nazi ideology (though he was an anti-Semite). Given the many horrible events of the twentieth century, Nietzsche's attitude to many matters now seems naïve, but perhaps because he was so little read in his lifetime, he clearly felt he had nothing to lose by putting his philosophical explosives under the bed of Europe.

The book has two sections of aphorisms, where can be found gems such as "Insanity in individuals is something rare - but in groups, parties, nations an epoch it is the rule" and "The thought of suicide gets one through many a bad night." Nietzsche had little luck with women and therefore disdained them but his aphorisms contain some interesting observations on relationship including "In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man." But just when one has come to the view that he is a little too hard-edged or even nasty, there is this: "What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil." Love transcends any classifications of morality. It is neither good nor bad but just is - that is its power. Nietzsche's wish to go beyond opposites is little different to the concept of "duality" in Eastern religions, in which light and dark, good and bad are mental constructions. Ultimately, everything just "is" and requires no labels.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche was born in Röcken, Prussia in 1844. His father (who died when Nietzsche was 5) and grandfather had been Lutheran ministers. He attended boarding school in Pforta, then studied classical philology at the University of Bonn. The young Nietzsche was considered so brilliant that at only 24 he was made a professor at the University of Basle. After a stint as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian War, he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Dogged by ill health, he had to resign from his professorship and thereafter lived on a modest pension in a series of rented rooms around Europe. In 1888, he suffered a mental breakdown (perhaps brought on by syphilis or depression) and was thereafter nursed by his mother, then his sister, until his death in 1900.

Major works include *Human All-too-Human* (1878), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), *The Antichrist* (1888), and the autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (1888).