

Ethical values in Nietzsche's thinking

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Abstract

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche criticized the values and the morality of his age, offering a new perspective on the moral life and new answers to old questions for his contemporary society his ideas influencing all the generations of thinkers after him being still actual today. He encouraged the people to question the morality in the light of the decline of religion which had begun to be obvious in the life of the society and in the context of the raising of natural science, seeking to destabilize the values of the contemporary politics and culture, opening a new path for the future philosophers in order to revive what he considered a degenerate culture. This paper is intended to present Nietzsche's new ideas concerning the moral values that have influenced the thinking of the following generations until nowadays.

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During the 19th century, the discoveries resulted from an intense scientific research together with the technical development gave birth to a new stream in the modern thinking of that time which had as result the weakening of the power of religion that had dominated the society for many centuries, the old beliefs and values being threatened by the new discoveries, lay credos and philosophical ideas supported by scientific and logical evidence. Generally speaking, it was a time of increased economic, cultural, political confidence, and the belief in science was high. Scientists and thinkers were presenting their new theories and ideas to the large public influencing the thinking of the century as well as well as the thinking of the future generations.

In the field of Ethics, the old problem of good and evil as well as the old values began to be re-evaluated in the light of the scientific perspective of the new beliefs and of the modern approach of man, life and society. In the early modern and in the Enlightenment periods, moral philosophers tried to identify general moral truths about how we should act, and then justified them with abstract, logical arguments. The Enlightenment can be broadly understood as an attempt to move away from long held beliefs, rooted in religion or tradition. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, philologist (a scholar of the languages history) and classical scholar criticized the values and the morality of his age, bringing a new perspective on the moral life and new answers to old questions which influenced the generations of thinkers after him being still actual even nowadays.

Writing after the Enlightenment, a time when Europe developed the modern tradition of scientific thought, Nietzsche

sought to draw out the consequences of the triumph of Enlightenment secularism (the view that the society should not be based on religious beliefs and practices) and to ask whether the absolute values were really possible in a world without God. Using the rational methods of the 18th century Anglo-Irish philosopher, George Berkley, Nietzsche tried to show that all of reality is a mental construct based on the sense perception. In a similar style, Arthur Schopenhauer had proposed in his magnum opus *“The World as Will and Representation”* that the will is the fundamental reality and everything else is representation. Lastly, Immanuel Kant had tried to give justification of Christian morality by deriving it from rules which any rational being should follow. For Kant, moral actions derive their worth from the underlying principles on which they are based: *“an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon”*.(Kant,1996:55). However, Nietzsche was highly critical of both deontological and utilitarian ethics and he criticized all these ideas. For him was important that the other philosophers like Kant, Spinoza, David Hume, Denis Diderot and Adam Smith failed to justify Christian morality, as *“the breakdown of this project provided the historical background against which the predicaments of our own culture can become intelligible”* (MacIntyre, 2011: 46-47).

The most influential contemporary approach to moral philosophy were Kant and Spinoza’s rationalism (morality is about being consistent with the reason) and Jeremy Bentham and Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism (for them, morality is not about being consistent with our rational natures, but arises because of our capacity to enjoy pleasure and to suffer; their ethics is centered on

the principle of “*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*”). He dismissed both types of theory, instead employing a new approach to moral questions that draws from natural history, anthropology and aesthetics.

Nietzsche analyzed the new ideas, values and beliefs of the modernity in two of his well-known works: “*Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*” and “*On the Genealogy and Morality*”, where he criticizes the modern values, politics and culture attempting reimagining morality in the light of the decline of the religious belief. The main concern of the philosopher is to readdress the question of what ideals the European society should live by. A new range of possibilities had opened up due to “*the unstoppable decline of faith in the Christian God*” (Nietzsche, 1998).

But Nietzsche was not the first doing so, as early medieval thinkers like Saint Anselm, Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas had also produced secular, rational, moral arguments alongside their theological works, and their ethical views still exerted an obvious influence on later thinkers. This abstract, logical manner of moral inquiry also has connections to the ancient Greek philosophy and especially to Plato and Socrates. The German philosopher hoped that this pursuit would lead us to challenge and ultimately give up the Christian morality and pursue spiritually healthier ways of thinking and feeling. Nietzsche’s text aims to clear the way for the “*philosophers of the future*” (Nietzsche, 2002: 29), powerful, independent thinkers who will be able to determine a new set of values for the humanity which would replace the old ones.

Beautifully written, witty and insightful, the achievement of “*Beyond the Good and Evil*” was to convincingly challenge many of

the society's most fundamental beliefs. This book presents us with a vision of how to combine the Enlightenment tradition of rational and scientific investigation with the Romanticist approach of a sensitive, learned inquiry into history and culture. The author criticized the modernity "*including modern science, modern art, even modern politics*" (Nietzsche, 2005). The aim of this work was to encourage the people to question the morality in the light of the decline of religion which had begun to be so obvious in the life of the society. It sought to destabilize the values of the contemporary politics and culture, and revive what he considered a degenerate artistic culture.

Due to the decline of religion and the rise of natural science, Nietzsche believed that it was impossible for anyone with a strong intellectual conscience to believe in God. The loss of this belief meant that the Christian moral ideals that underpinned contemporary society lacked any absolute foundation. It was vital to make clear that the Christian interpretation of Good and Evil represent only one of many possibilities for the ethical life. This point could only be made through detailed anthropological study of other cultures and their alternative belief systems. The German philosopher took the view that moral and cultural questions cannot be split up into isolated areas of inquiry. The question of how we should choose to live, both individually and collectively, should encompass "*modern science, modern art even modern politics*". And "*what is needed now is historical philosophy and with it the virtue of modesty*" (Williams, 2002).

For the author, moral principles are expressions of our individual drives, inclinations and experiences, so any approach dealing purely in rational argumentation can at most be only a

“*type of involuntary and unselfconscious memoir*” (Nietzsche,2002:8). A new kind of philosophical inquiry is needed, with broader connections to history and psychology. For Nietzsche, to measure the moral worth merely in terms of pleasure and pain is to judge things” *according to incidental states and trivialities*” (Nietzsche, 2002: 116). Such basic subjective feelings are mere “*foreground ways of thinking and naivetes* ” (Nietzsche, 2002).He also disputes the neutrality of the utilitarian conception of happiness, showing it to be a culturally specific ideal of “*English Happiness*”, that is “*comfort and fashion and, at the highest level, a seat for the Parliament*”(Nietzsche,2002: 119).

Throughout his works, as well as in “*Beyond Good and Evil*”, Nietzsche is concerned with addressing the same cluster of problems: the consequences of declining religious belief, especially regarding the supposedly absolute moral valuations; the decline of the contemporary culture more generally and how best to revive it; and the nature and possibility of objective truth in the sciences and within moral philosophy. The text is split into nine parts that together undermine many deeply ingrained moral, cultural and political attitudes that were dominant in the 19th century Germany and can be found even in our life nowadays. In the parts 2 and 3, “*The Free Spirit*” and “*The Religious Character*”, he describes the dominant idea of a virtuous man as influenced by religious values. He later compares this with his own view of a spiritually healthy human being. Part 5, “*On the Natural History of Morals*” explores the origins of how we have arrived at our understanding of the concepts of “*good*” and “*evil*”, aiming at destabilizing the Christian ideals and discourage us from taking our inherited moral framework for granted. In a world where

morality is no longer supported by religious beliefs, many people having become skeptical of the existing conceptions of “*good*” and “*evil*”, the German philosopher implores the future philosophers to supply the society with new moral values to live by.

For Nietzsche, science however was unable to replace Christian values which it was now necessary since the “*Death of God*” (an expression through Nietzsche conveys the declining influence and power of the Christian religion). Furthermore, he saw the German culture as degenerate and unoriginal, lacking a “*unity of artistic style*” (Nietzsche, 1997:5), contrasting German morality with “*realpolitik*”, as politics based on pragmatic considerations of power and military strength rather than on majority consent. In parts 8 and 9, “*Our Virtues*” and “*What is Noble?*”, he begins to conceive a new morality according to the new realities this being intended to replace the Judeo-Christian ideals he had systematically undermined in this work.

Nietzsche’s achievement was to draw out the consequences of the Enlightenment secularism and reveal that the traditional foundations of morality had since slipped away, meaning that a different kind of inquiry is now necessary- concerned not with the abstract truth, but with legislating new ideals for society to live by that will contribute to the spiritual growth, and the flourishing of culture and the arts. “*Morality in Europe these days is the morality of herd animals- and therefore, as we understand things, it is only one type of human morality beside which, and after which many other (especially higher) moralities are or should be possible*” (Nietzsche,2002).

Nietzsche regarded the Christian morality and the popular ideologies like democracy or utilitarianism as limitations on humankind’s true greatness and he believed that they hindered

the development of what he considered the most valuable kind of human being. What is required in his view is twofold: “*typology of morals*” (Nietzsche, 2002:75), documenting the different kinds of morality in existence, and then a ranking to define which of them is the most conducive to mankind’s proper spiritual development. This is Nietzsche’s proposed re-evaluation of all the values”. In order to make this determination in a truly objective spirit, we must set aside our conventional moral beliefs so it can take place “*beyond good and evil*”.

For Nietzsche, the ultimate causes of our choices are emotional rather than rational and this extends to our philosophical beliefs as well. These causes are often not obvious or even visible to us. He also give an description of the self as a combination of competing and conflicting drives that are largely unconscious and sometimes amoral, and this idea is offered as an alternative to the dominant concept of the self as a simple entity that may be separated from the body: “*the soul superstition that still causes trouble as the superstition of that subject or I*”.(Nietzsche, 2002:3).The idea would later be expanded by Freud, and through his concept of “*unconscious*” would go on to influence the psychoanalysis and all the modern psychology. Anticipating a century of research in psychology, Nietzsche wrote that “*the greatest part of conscious thought must still be attributed to instinctive activity, and this is even the case for philosophical thought*”(Nietzsche,2002).He succeeded in clearing the way for future thinkers to provide new ideals to live by, replacing the Christian framework he attacked, but he did not offer any other alternative. Finally, Nietzsche criticized the nationalism, thinking that the people should transcend it moving to a unified Europe.

In “*On the Genealogy of Morality*”, Nietzsche offered a historical narrative detailing the origins and development of three aspects of moral overlook criticized in “*Beyond Good and Evil*”: our conception of right and wrong, our moral conscience, and the “ascetic ideal” wherein the highest kind of human life is seen as the monastic life of piety, abstinence and self-denial, characterized by “poverty, humility and chastity” (Nietzsche, 1998:76). He calls into question the religious morality then dominant in Europe and considers other possibilities for ethical life. The book takes a historical approach to moral philosophy. It takes a form of an extended historical narrative that examines the roots of the 19th century European morality, the Judeo-Christian morality characterized by the ideals of compassion, humility, selflessness, chastity, piety and truthfulness. Nietzsche wrote a history of the human moral conscience locating its origins in more primitive creditor-debtor relationships and in the pleasure gained from inflicting punishment. Here, he asserts that as societies became more civilized and physical aggression towards others was less tolerated, our natural instincts to cruelty turn in on ourselves, creating what we now experience as guilt or bad conscience.

The first essay gives the origins of our current concepts of “good” and “evil” which, as Nietzsche considered, arose when the weak and mediocre masses rose up to take a kind of spiritual revenge on their natural masters—the strong, fearless, noble types, who became regarded as “evil”, under the Christian interpretation of morality. “The project of a genealogy of morality is to account for the origins of the inherited morality and to explain in pure naturalistic terms, without appeal to the voice of God or an immortal soul in touch with the

eternal values, the origins of morality. The question is not why we are morally good, but why is that human animals accept (hence act on basis of) specifically moral reasons or values” (Nietzsche,1998).

For Nietzsche, the historical inquiry reveals that the valuation “*good*” emerged as a mark of distinction of rank in a social hierarchy rather than denoting what was useful for society as a whole. He aimed to locate the origins of moral values in the natural world “*in terms of human psychology and without resorting to God or metaphysics*” (Nietzsche,1998, xiii). Since Hume, two important events had occurred: the rapid growth of the evolutionary biology spurred by the publication of Charles Darwin’s “*On the Origins of Species*”, in 1859, then the articulation and development of utilitarian ethics by Jeremy Bentham and then Stuart Mill. Herbert Spencer argued for the utilitarianism view that good actions are simply those actions that have useful consequences and Hume’s account is similar. Nietzsche considered these explanations reasonable, but false. His “*difference from other naturalistic philosophers must be sought first in his profound concern whether universally valid values and a meaningful life are possible in a godless world, and secondly is his impassioned scorn for those who simply take for granted the validity of any particular set of values which happens to have the sanction of their religion, class, society or state*” (Kaufmann,1974).

Nietzsche argued that rather than being universal, inevitable and expressing absolute values, contemporary moral ideas are highly contingent historical developments (meaning accidental and depending on circumstances) that may now be undermining mankind’s development. He brought a fresh historical spirit to the inquiry, changing the standards pertaining to accounts of the

origins of morality regarding himself as the first thinker to attempt a truly historical analysis of the morality origins.

The central themes of “*On the Genealogy and Morality*” are: the distinction between master and slave moralities, our moral conscience as repression and redirection of instincts to cruelty, and the ascetic ideal as a conception of highest purpose of life. In the first essay, “*Good and Evil, Good and Bad*”, Nietzsche compares different moralities, observing that they fall into two types: “*noble moralities*”, according to which we see strong individuals with “*powerful physicality*” and “*blossoming rich, even overflowing health*” (Nietzsche, 1998:16). “*The slave moralities*” are the moral sphere of weak individuals who must band together as a herd for safety, seeing the noble class through the “*poisonous eye of resentment*”, (Nietzsche, 1998: 22) designating it as “*evil*”, while labeling themselves as “*good*”. In addition to the two classes, Nietzsche also introduces another group: the priests who stir up the resentments –repressed anger at one’s situation later directed outward toward others – of the slave class that ultimately enable them to achieve a kind of “*spiritual revenge*”. However, while suitable for a mediocre type of person, the slave morality is unhealthy for the spiritually superior people.

In the second essay, “*Guilt, Bad Conscience and Related Matters*”, Nietzsche explains how the human moral conscience has developed in history: beginning from the picture of creditor-debtor relationships, “*the oldest and the most primitive relationship among persons*” (Nietzsche, 1998) he explains how we have arrived at our current ways of thinking, the most important idea here being sublimation, which describes how the human instincts can be reoriented to other and more civil purposes. For Nietzsche, the

greater part of human thought and action is motivated by unconscious desires and primitive, sometimes barbaric instincts. By the time he wrote his “*Genealogy*”. Even philosophical thinking itself was seen as based on unconscious motivations: “*every animal, thus also the philosophical animal, instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can vent its power completely*”(Nietzsche,1998:53).

The third essay, “*What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?*”, discusses the conception of the good life as a monkish life of prayer, “*poverty, humility, chastity*” and self-denial: the “*anti-sensual metaphysics of priests*”(Nietzsche, 1998:15). Prior to man “*finding himself enclosed once and for all within the sway of society and peace*” (Nietzsche,1998:56)in the modern age, our behavior was one much less constrained and more natural. It is only with the new set of challenges introduced by civilization that we are so often reduced to explicit rational thinking, to relying on our “*poorest and most erring organ*”(Nietzsche,1998:54).

According to Nietzsche, as the values of contemporary Europe are largely Christian in origins, the ideal human being, as conceived through the influence of these values is compassionate, selfless, weak, humble, pious and chaste. But at the time Nietzsche was writing faith was increasingly being lost, both in the Christian morality and in the Enlightenment project of attempting to rationalize the moral order without recourse to divinity, as attempted by philosophers such Immanuel Kant and Baruch Spinoza. It means that without belief in either religion or in Enlightenment values, we are no longer bound to accept the authority of the traditional Christian morality. The philosopher considers it to be of the greatest importance that we question the

value which now holds for us. Nietzsche criticizes our received beliefs about virtue, and ultimately comes to reject them all, challenging the future philosophers to create a new understanding of the virtues and to construct more spiritually worthwhile ideals to live by. As the values he attacks are still largely those that define our society, this is a challenge that nobody can afford to ignore.

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