

Nietzsche's critique of past philosophers

Nietzsche identifies his two major grounds for criticizing past philosophers in his Preface: that their theories are founded on 'some play on words perhaps, some seductive aspect of grammar, or a daring generalization from very limited, very personal, very human, all-too-human facts'. The worst errors of philosophy have been, first, a metaphysics of transcendence – the idea of a 'true' or 'real' world, which transcends this world of the senses, the world as we experience; and second, the denial of what Nietzsche calls 'perspectivity'. Both errors can be found in Plato's philosophy, in particular his theory of the forms, which involves the ideas of spirit and goodness as independent and transcendent of this world. Plato left a legacy of error for Western philosophical and religious views; the idea of a 'real' world that is transcendent of this world can be found in Christian thought, and so all Christian philosophers, including Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz. It appears in Spinoza, Kant and the post-Kantian tradition in which Nietzsche is writing, including Hegel and Schopenhauer.

ORIGINS AND OPPOSITES

Nietzsche argues that the origin of this false belief in a transcendental world is a moral belief, viz. that what is of value – truth, goodness, altruism, wisdom – cannot have its origins in its opposite, i.e. in this 'lowly, deceptive world' of the senses and desire. These values must therefore come from, and refer to, something imperishable, not things as they appear to us, but Reality itself. 'The metaphysicians' fundamental belief is the belief in the opposition of values' (§2). So before we accept their theories and arguments, we should ask a series of questions, each developing the last:

1. Do opposites exist, i.e. is truth the opposite of falsehood, is goodness the opposite of badness?
2. Why does it appear that opposites exist? Perhaps this is a shallow or misleading perspective.
3. Whatever the value of truth and goodness, could it be that deception, selfishness, lust are more valuable? Valuable to whom and for what, we have yet to see.
4. Can we explain the values of truth and goodness by their relation to their supposed opposites, so that the value of truth and goodness lie not in their transcendence but in their being necessary illusions and expressions of egoistic desire?

Nietzsche is questioning the very foundations of philosophy. To accept his claims means being a new kind of philosopher, ones who 'taste and inclination', whose values, are quite different.

Throughout his philosophy, Nietzsche is concerned with origins, both psychological and historical. Much of philosophy is usually thought of as an a priori investigation. But if Nietzsche can show, as he thinks he can, that philosophical theories and arguments have a specific historical basis, then they are not, in fact, a priori. What is known a priori should not change from one historical era to the next, nor should it depend on someone's psychology.

Plato's aim, the aim that defines much of philosophy, is to be able to give complete definitions of ideas – 'what is justice?', 'what is knowledge?'. For Plato, we understand an idea when we have direct knowledge of the Form, which is unchanging and has no history. If our ideas have a history, then the philosophical project of trying to give definitions of our concepts, rather than histories, is radically mistaken.

For example, in §186, Nietzsche argues that philosophers have consulted their 'intuitions' to try to justify this or that moral principle. But they have only been aware of their own morality, of which their 'justifications' are in fact only expressions. Morality and moral intuitions have a history, and are not a priori. There is no one definition of justice or good, and the 'intuitions' that we use to defend this or that theory are themselves as historical, as contentious as the theories we give – so they offer no real support. The usual ways philosophers discuss morality misunderstands morality from the very outset. The real issues of understanding morality only emerge when we look at the relation between this particular morality and that. There is no world of unchanging ideas, no truths beyond the truths of the world we experience, nothing that stands outside or beyond nature and history.

GENEALOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Nietzsche develops a new way of philosophizing, which he calls a 'morphology and evolutionary theory' (§23), and later calls 'genealogy'. ('Morphology' means the study of the forms something, e.g. morality, can take; 'genealogy' means the historical line of descent traced from an ancestor.) He aims to locate the historical origin of philosophical and religious ideas and show how they have changed over time to the present day. His investigation brings together history, psychology, the interpretation of concepts, and a keen sense of what it is like to live with particular ideas and values. In order to best understand which of our ideas and values are particular to us, not a priori or universal, we need to look at real alternatives. In order to understand these alternatives, we need to understand the psychology of the people who lived with them.

And so Nietzsche argues that traditional ways of doing philosophy fail – our intuitions are not a reliable guide to the 'truth', to the 'real' nature of this or that idea or value. And not just our intuitions, but the arguments, and style of arguing, that philosophers have used are unreliable. Philosophy needs to become, or be informed by, genealogy. A lack of any historical sense, says Nietzsche, is the 'hereditary defect' of all philosophers.

MOTIVATIONAL ANALYSIS

Having long kept a strict eye on the philosophers, and having looked between their lines, I say to myself... most of a philosopher's conscious thinking is secretly guided and channelled into particular tracks by his instincts. Behind all logic, too, and its apparent tyranny of movement there are value judgements, or to speak more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a particular kind of life. (§3)

A person's theoretical beliefs are best explained, Nietzsche thinks, by evaluative beliefs, particular interpretations of certain values, e.g. that goodness is *this* and the opposite of badness. These values are best explained as 'physiological demands for the preservation of a particular kind of life'. Nietzsche holds that each person has a particular psycho-physical constitution, formed by both heredity and culture. Now, 'all animals, including *la*

bête philosophique [the philosophical animal], strive instinctively for an optimum combination of favourable conditions which allow them to expend all their energy and achieve their maximum feeling of power' (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III §7). Putting these points together, there are different 'types' of people, who are drawn to the different types of life that suit them best. (The main division Nietzsche discusses is between people who are naturally 'masters' and leaders, and those who are need to be obedient, 'slaves'.) Different values, and different interpretations of these values, support different ways of life, and so people are instinctively drawn to particular values and ways of understanding them. On the basis of these interpretations of values, people come to hold particular philosophical views.

§2 has given us an illustration of this: philosophers come to hold metaphysical beliefs about a transcendent world, the 'true' and 'good' world, because they cannot believe that truth and goodness could originate in the world of normal experience, which is full of illusion, error, and selfishness. Therefore, there 'must' be a pure, spiritual world and a spiritual part of human beings, which is the origin of truth and goodness.

Philosophy and values

But 'must' there be a transcendent world? Or is this just what the philosopher *wants* to be true? Every great philosophy, claims Nietzsche, is 'the personal confession of its author' (§6). The moral aims of a philosophy are the 'seed' from which the whole theory grows. Philosophers pretend that their opinions have been reached by 'cold, pure, divinely unhampered dialectic' when in fact, they are seeking reasons to support their pre-existing commitment to 'a rarefied and abstract version of their heart's desire' (§5), viz. that there is a transcendent world, and that good and bad, true and false are opposites.

Consider: Many philosophical systems are of doubtful coherence, e.g. how *could* there be Forms, and if there were, how *could* we know about them? Or again, in §11, Nietzsche asks 'how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?'. The term 'synthetic a priori' was invented by Kant. According to Nietzsche, Kant says that such judgments are possible, because we have a 'faculty' that makes them possible. What kind of answer is this?? Furthermore, no philosopher has ever been proved right (§25).

Given the great difficulty of believing either in a transcendent world or in human cognitive abilities necessary to know about it, we should look elsewhere for an explanation of why someone would hold those beliefs. We can find an answer in their values.

There is an interesting structural similarity between Nietzsche's argument and Hume's. Both argue that there is no *rational* explanation of many of our beliefs, and so they try to find the source of these beliefs outside or beyond reason. Hume appeals to imagination and the principle of 'Custom'. Nietzsche appeals instead to motivation and 'the bewitchment of language' (see below).

So Nietzsche argues that philosophy is not driven by a pure 'will to truth' (§1), to discover the truth whatever it may be. Instead, a philosophy interprets the world in terms of the philosopher's values. For example, the Stoics argued that we should live 'according to nature' (§9). But they interpret nature by their own values, as an embodiment of rationality. They do not see the *senselessness*, the purposelessness, the indifference of nature to our lives.

PHILOSOPHERS' VALUES: THE 'ASCETIC IDEAL' AND THE 'WILL TO TRUTH'

Nietzsche argues that our values support a particular kind of life, one in which we can achieve a maximum feeling of power. If philosophical beliefs rest on values, and values are expressions of power, then philosophical beliefs are also, indirectly, an expression of power. How are philosophers' values supposed to express their 'instincts' and create 'favourable conditions' for philosophers? In fact, Nietzsche only hints at this idea in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but spells it out in his next book *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

In brief, philosophy requires a lifestyle not of action but of contemplation. And as a way of life, philosophy requires a certain 'ascetism', i.e. self-discipline and a refusal to indulge one's bodily desires. People who are constitutionally drawn to a life of contemplation will find it difficult if they are surrounded by a culture of action, of politics and business, and a set of values that supports these activities. They can protect their life of the mind, and justify their ascetism, by arguing that there are transcendent values of the mind – knowledge of the truth and goodness – that are greater than the values of the body and the world of experience and action. This enables them to maximise their feeling of power – over themselves (ascetism) and over others (in the first instance, in getting other people to *respect* their way of life) (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III §§7-9).

We can now interpret §1. Philosophy is wrong to think that it is an expression of the 'will to truth', as other values come into play. Second, making *the discovery of truth* 'at whatever cost' one's guiding value is itself an expression of the ascetic ideal. It elevates knowledge (mind) over action (body), and expresses a willingness to bear the 'cost' of the truth. The truth can be unpleasant and its discovery arduous. So what is the value of 'will to truth'? Why do we prefer truth to untruth, uncertainty, ignorance? In fact, Nietzsche argues, often we don't, but we *say* that we do, i.e. we hold truth to be a value, even if we do not always act according to that value. So what does truth as a *value* do for us?

Nietzsche is immediately aware of the paradox of this question – he wants to know *the truth* about the will to truth! So he is expressing the will to truth in asking the question. In raising the question, the questioner is asking about himself. But the question, Nietzsche says repeatedly, is dangerous. How much are we really willing to risk in looking for an answer? Nietzsche argues that the will to truth originates in a kind of self-deception (§2). It presents itself as driven by the value of truth alone (as though this has no relation to anything else), but in fact, it is part of a set of values that seeks to protect conditions in which certain kinds of people, such as philosophers, can live the kind of life that maximises their feeling of power.

A BRIEF REFLECTION

What are we to make of Nietzsche's argument? First, are we being encouraged to try to do philosophy *without* imposing our values on the world? Not at all – in fact, this is not possible, says Nietzsche. But we should not lack the courage to see that this is what we are doing. The new philosopher, the philosophers of the future, will explicitly set out to be the creators of values. Unlike the values of the past that have all concealed their origins, the new values will explicitly and openly express the will to power.

Second, is Nietzsche's critique accurate and fair? In many instances, it is not. For instance, it is often over-simplified. But we must remember that Nietzsche is *inviting* us to think of philosophy differently, suspiciously, in relation to the idea that even philosophers are a

kind of animal, and there are facts about how any animal is motivated to express its power. He is not trying to prove to us (using traditional philosophical arguments) that philosophy is as he says it is. His rhetoric is part of his method.

So what about his 'factual claim' that all animals try to create favourable conditions in which to express their 'power'? We have seen no support for it yet; we discuss it in the handout on 'The will to power', where we also look at further objections to his analysis of philosophy until then.

THE 'CORRECT' PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

The title of the book, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* suggests that the past has been concerned with the wrong question, a concern with what is good and its distinction from what is evil. In §1, Nietzsche makes the same point with truth – philosophers have asked 'what is true?', but they have not asked what the value of the truth is. They have not questioned their will to truth.

Nor have they questioned their judgment that appearance is less important than truth. Less important in what way, or for what? There is an assumption that what is true will, in some way, be *beneficial* for us. We assume that the true and the good are the same (as in Plato's theory of the Forms). Nietzsche invites us to consider whether what is false could actually be essential, *essential for life*, 'that man could not live without accepting logical fictions' (§4), such as the 'I' (see the next section) or the idea of a transcendent world. That 'truth' and 'goodness' are more important than falsehood and deception may itself be a deception that we cannot live without (§3). 'Admitting untruth as a condition of life: that means to resist familiar values in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that dares this has already placed itself beyond good and evil.' (§4) That is, such a philosophy does not approve just of what is good and true; it may also approve of what is false and evil. The standard by which it operates, the life it recommends, lies beyond our usual values.

These are not easy thoughts; they are difficult and distressing. Yet we must come to recognise, says Nietzsche, that hatred, envy, greed and hunger for power are necessary for life (§23). To disapprove of them is to disapprove of life. The ascetic ideal, he will argue, does just this – it disapproves of organic, bodily, instinctual life, and deceptively substitutes for it a life of the 'spirit'. In rejecting the illusions created by the ascetic ideal, we travel beyond morality.

THE BEWITCHMENT OF LANGUAGE

We said above that Nietzsche criticizes past philosophers on two grounds. We have looked at the role of motivation; the second ground is the seduction of grammar. Nietzsche is concerned with the subject-predicate structure of language, and with it the notion of a 'substance' (picked out by the grammatical 'subject') to which we attribute 'properties' (identified by the predicate). This structure leads us into a mistaken metaphysics of 'substances'. In particular, Nietzsche is concerned with the grammar of 'I'. We tend to think that 'I' refers to some thing, e.g. the soul. Descartes makes this mistake in his cogito – 'I think', he argues, refers to a substance engaged in an activity. But Nietzsche repeats the old objection that this is an illegitimate inference (§16) that rests on many unproven assumptions – that I am thinking, that some thing is thinking, that thinking is an activity (the result of a cause, viz. I), that an 'I' exists, that we know what it is to think.

So the simple sentence 'I think' is misleading. In fact, 'a thought comes when 'it' wants to, and not when 'I' want it to' (§17). Even 'there is thinking' isn't right: 'even this 'there' contains an interpretation of the process and is not part of the process itself. People are concluding here according to grammatical habit'. But our language does not allow us just to say 'thinking' – this is not a whole sentence. We have to say 'there is thinking'; so grammar constrains our understanding. Furthermore, Kant shows that rather than the 'I' being the basis of thinking, thinking is the basis out of which the appearance of an 'I' is created (§54).

Once we recognise that there is no soul in a traditional sense, no 'substance', something constant through change, something unitary and immortal, 'the way is clear for new and refined versions of the hypothesis about the soul' (§12), that it is mortal, that it is multiplicity rather than identical over time, even that it is a social construct and a society of drives.

Nietzsche makes a similar argument about the will (§19). Because we have this one word 'will', we think that what it refers to must also be one thing. But the act of willing is highly complicated. First, there is an emotion of command, for willing is commanding oneself to do something, and with it a feeling of superiority over that which obeys. Second, there is the expectation that the mere commanding on its own is enough for the action to follow, which increases our sense of power. Third, there is obedience to the command, from which we also derive pleasure. But we ignore the feeling the compulsion, identifying the 'I' with the commanding 'will'.

Nietzsche links the seduction of language to the issue of motivation in §20, arguing that 'the spell of certain grammatical functions is the spell of physiological value judgements'. So even the grammatical structure of language originates in our instincts, different grammars contributing to the creation of favourable conditions for different types of life. So what values are served by these notions of the 'I' and the 'will'? The 'I' relates to the idea that we have a soul, which participates in a transcendent world. It functions in support of the ascetic ideal. The 'will', and in particular our inherited conception of 'free will', serves a particular moral aim, which is discussed in the handout on 'Morality and human nature'.