

PHIL 181: Lecture #5: Nietzsche

Background

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, was born in 1844, named after a Prussian king who shared his birthday. His father was a Lutheran minister who died when he was 4. This resulted in his growing up with 5 very pious women. Their influence on him made him think that he would study religion, but when he got to the university he ended up studying philology, which was then the study of classic ancient Greek and Latin texts, as well as some biblical texts. He was appointed as a professor in Basel in 1869 at the age of 24, an unheard of age for such a position in German academia at the time. He worked very hard, and ending up resigning ten years later citing bad health. Nietzsche suffered from migraines, eyesight problems, a nervous stomach, and possibly some injuries sustained from a short stint in the military. These health problems are thought to play a large part in his use of the themes of sickness and health throughout his works.

After his resignation, he lived a very wandering, nomadic existence. He travelled around Europe, swinging between his mother's home and many Swiss, French, German, and Italian locations, hoping to find a congenial climate that would relieve his health problems. The only romantic episode of his life happened during this period when he fell in love with Lou von Salome, later associated with both Rilke and Freud. Nietzsche proposed marriage very quickly and was rejected, and the relationship was very short. With this being the only romantic event in his life, it can be said that he never developed a strong relationship with any woman, and in fact led a pretty celibate life.

Nietzsche suffered a mental collapse in 1889, and remained an invalid until his death in 1900. It used to be thought that the madness was due to syphilis, but the fact that his life was appeared mostly celibate has led some to speculate about various brain disorders and complications from medications he took for his health problems. While some say his madness can be seen growing in his work before his collapse, and that it was not sudden, but others argue that it is simply interpretive laziness to read madness into his later work.

Nietzsche did have several influences in his work. One of the biggest was German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose work he picked up by chance in a bookstore. Schopenhauer's philosophy was atheistic and presented a very turbulent and pessimistic picture of the world. Schopenhauer also placed a great emphasis on aesthetics, having especially high praise for music, as being the best mode at revealing the hidden parts of the world. Nietzsche was also influenced by the German composer Richard Wagner, famous for his operas, which drew heavily on German and Northern European mythology. Wagner and Nietzsche became very close, but had a very stormy relationship, with Nietzsche eventually condemning his quasi-father figure as coming

under the spell of Christianity. A third influence is F.A. Lange, who was a neo-Kantian and anti-materialist.

A note should be made about Nietzsche's very idiosyncratic rhetorical style. It was largely aphoristic and anti-systematic, which gave the impression that it lacked a central argument. It instead featured recurring themes and ideas, and appeared like he was working out a problem. It should not be inferred from his style that his work was completely disorganized and was lacking in philosophical argument. It is just that his clever and unoriginal style do provide some interpretive problems that would not be present in a traditional, straightforward philosophic work.

The Affirmation of Life

A major theme in Nietzsche's works is that of affirmation of life, of life as it is actually lived. Three aspects of this will be touched on.

1. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

In a way, we can see Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as mirrors. Both men are attack something like the same problem: the "disenchantment" of modern life and the loss of religion at the center of life, which Nietzsche referred to as "The Death of God." Both also emphasized the concrete reality of *life* over abstract *thought*. But while Kierkegaard recommended a radical recovery of the religious, Nietzsche opposed religion and recommended noble striving for power and reconnection with and expression of the raw undercurrent of life itself as it exists prior to our theories of it.

2. The Dionysian and Apollonian (*The Birth of Tragedy* (1872))

Another place this affirmation of life can be seen is in his characterization of the Dionysian and the Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The work is a critique of the overly rationalist 19th Century understanding of ancient Greece and Rome, specifically focusing on tragedy. Dionysus (or Bacchus to the Romans) was the patron god of Greek tragedy, as well as the god of the vine, the harvest, intoxication, and revelry. Ancient celebrations of him were wild and orgiastic, both in a literal and metaphorical sense.

Nietzsche characterized the Dionysian as associated with pre-Socratic period and possessing a non-rational, instinctual, wild, and amoral energy. It was a creative and healthy force, associated with music, and reflected the primal totality of nature. The picture it gave was of a world that was non-discrete, holistic, and ever-changing. The Apollonian impulse, on the other hand, started with Socrates and Plato, and emphasized logical order and was a form-giving force. It made the world manageable and ordered, but Nietzsche saw it as relatively unhealthy. It was more associated with architecture, painting, and sculpture as opposed to music. Art is a tension between these two forces, and one is always in danger of falling to fully into one or the other.

3. Health as a Prime Value

This affirmation of life also played a part in Nietzsche's theme of Sickness and Health, which replaced what was normally called Evil and Good. Health was associated with power while illness was associated with degeneration. Nietzsche saw this as doing philosophy from the point of view of Life.

Morality and Values after the Death of God

Nietzsche is very famous for the phrase stating that "God is dead." But this is not meant as a proof against the existence of God, but rather declares the realization that there are no absolutes left. The skeptical examination of beliefs throughout Western history (part of philosophy, science, even Christianity) has slowly undermined all absolutes. This distinction can be clarified with showing the difference between "deep" and "casual" atheism. Although they are very firm and sometimes strident in their atheism, both Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins exemplify "casual" atheism. Their works use philosophical, scientific, and other arguments to score points against the arguments for the existence of God, essentially trying to discredit it as a claim. Deep atheism, characterized here by Nietzsche, was focused more on the loss of religiousness in people's lives, the consequences of the removal of the foundational claims of religions from people's lives. He thought that this would give people a sense of "weightlessness," of a sense of no firm foundation for their beliefs, values, or lives. This opens people up to *nihilism*, or a disbelief in all values.

The first reactions that Nietzsche thought would happen would be for people to create a new absolute in their lives, what he called the "shadows of God." Examples of this include nature-worship, which involved a kind of deification of nature (giving it a capital N), and scientific realism, where the truths of science are supposed to lead the way in all areas of life.

Nietzsche viewed Christianity as a philosophy that was anti-Life. He saw the origin of Christianity amongst repressed people in a Roman backwater. It demanded what he called a "Slave-morality": this was a reversal of values from classical nobility (strength, honor, courage, etc.) to values of "the herd." The characteristics that allowed one group to become dominated, their weakness and lack of capability, are raised up as virtues. One good example is the famous claim that "the meek shall inherit the Earth." He felt that this morality was informed by revenge, resentment, hatred, impotence, and cowardice. It was essentially a way of living a revenge fantasy against their rulers; it was a way to deal with their own impotence to change the situation.

A related philosophy is that of Romanticism. This is at play in *Birth of Tragedy*, and Nietzsche felt that he had succumbed to it. He saw it as an unhealthy philosophy where people had a nostalgic longing for a bygone age, a primordial time when things were better. It is used to disvalue the present and future in favor of an unreachable past. He saw several different versions of this philosophy: the Garden of Eden and original sin where man was originally innocent and threw it away and we have to get back, primitivism that portrays life before civilization as peaceful, free, and creative, Marxism which is similar to primitivism except it postulates economics as the culprit, and conservatism where the past is always displayed as better and liberal changes of society are always viewed negatively.

These philosophies also aspired to an ascetic ideal, where the present is always sacrificed in favor of some future state, and people do not live their lives. They also subscribe to teleological metanarratives, which are stories about the goal or purpose of existence. Nietzsche saw these metanarratives as a symptom of sickness as they offered a negative judgment about life. It offers comfort, stating that everything will eventually be okay. He sees these people as being in denial about the world and also denying their natural, life-affirming instincts.

Eternal recurrence

This situation leads to question for people: Given the death of God, how are we to live? There is no future state worth striving for, no ground for our existence, and life seems to be meaningless and disconnected. People are essentially led into nihilism. Nietzsche saw one way for us to reorient our lives in focusing on “eternal recurrence of the same.” This is a thought experiment with ancient Stoic roots, which states that in a finite universe with a finite scope of possible events and infinite time, everything will repeat itself an infinite number of times (the passage containing this idea is in *The Gay Science*, aphorism 341, which can be found in the Existentialism anthology). Nietzsche felt that this shatters any sense of teleology, any sense that things are working towards some end, and forces the affirmation of each moment of life. Taking the thought experiment seriously as informing your way of living forces you to completely embrace life as it is and appropriate and own your experiences. There is no need to worry about some future state, and you will *will* your life in every detail in order to make it your own.

Perspectivism

Nietzsche denied the possibility of some "God's-eye-view." He asserted that there was no absolute or privileged way to understand or perceive the world “as it is in itself,” only many different perspectives on the world. This is a consequence of taking the death of God with full seriousness. This perspectivism states that everything we see, believe, or regard as solid fact comes from a certain perspective. All ways of seeing the world are an interpretation that are not dictated by the world. We contribute significantly based on our interests and linguistic habits, as well as our biological natures (one can see a neo-

Kantian influence here). Science is in this view just one interpretation among others, and its apparent superiority is mere prejudice. There is no way to get outside of our perspectives to compare them to each other or the world.

Nietzsche also denies the dualism between appearance and reality, which had been a common view at least since Plato. Appearance is what is perceptible; what is on the surface. Reality is what underlies, explains, and creates appearances, and is taken as supreme while appearance is derivative and misleading. Reality was originally thought to be accessible through reason, and later through science. He felt that this dualism is another form of Romanticism, where the longing for "reality" or "the true world" is a sickness. What is needed is an affirmation of things as we find them, as they appear.

This dualism as well as other basic metaphysical concepts are projections of our needs rather than features of the world. Examples include substance, causality, duration, and consciousness. Natural kinds are tailored to our intellect while the idea that discrete, identifiable objects exist is a requirement of our systems of logic and thinking and not a fact of nature. These are anthropomorphisms based on our own social and normative ideals. And as such, these fundamental beliefs (scientific, moral) are matters of choice, they are optional. The concepts of reality, good, truth, beauty are social constructions reflecting our need for comfort.

The Will to Power

For Nietzsche, healthy things strive for power and not just survival, this is in contrast to Spinoza and Darwin (some interpretations). There is a biological imperative to flourish, thrive, and become greater. The tree in the field and the fish in the pond do not become just big enough for survival, but rather grow as big as resources will allow.

But power is not necessarily about dominating others. Negating the will to power for other people, bringing other people down, is sickly and resentful. Positive will to power is active, yes-saying, and healthy. The ideal of the will to power is affirmative, not destructive. Power is creative, artistic, and future-oriented, where what matters is the style of one's existence. There is an artistic plan given to one's life, a "single taste." Life becomes a narrative that you compose.

The Overman (Superman, Übermensch) is the ideal man for Nietzsche. He also refers to them as free spirits who understand their rooting in perspective, background interpretation of their culture but also understand that cultural interpretations aren't binding. They take new perspectives, create new interpretations, and forge new values. To be an Overman, you must "become who you are." You should own and affirm your past, present, and future, weaving them into a coherent story. You impart to your life your own personal style.

Experimentalism

Nietzsche also portrays the Overman as an Experimentalist, a person who picks up pieces of society after absolutes are gone and tries them out. He thought of this experimentation as a playful and creative activity (*The Gay Science*). These people experiment with new values and moralities, always staying true to themselves and the artistic vision that they picked out.

Discussion - Both Textual and General

Passage: Problem with Socrates - starts on p473

Q: What does Socrates refer to life as a sickness and what does this say?

- One view is that he is longing for some other, better state. This is the opposite of a life-affirming philosophy and Nietzsche would view it negatively
- This is supposedly evidence by the fact that Socrates is portrayed as “asking for” the death penalty during the trial and refused to attempt to escape.
- He did follow an ascetic ideal, which denied life and desires, but he did live up to the ideals he had set for himself.

Q: What is the larger purpose of this passage for Nietzsche?

- He is turning the normal story of Socrates on its head, where he is not looking at what Socrates said, but rather looks at Socrates’ attitude toward life and see what it implies.
- It is a creative re-reading to set up Nietzsche’s critique of reason

Passage: page 484 - summary of his critique of reason in philosophy

- He is saying that there is only the one world of experience, that there is no such thing as a “true world” and an “apparent world.”
- The idea of a “true world” is anti-Life, it creates an impossible ideal to revenge out on this life.

Passage: “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” p485-6

- It is about the rise and fall of dualistic views of the world, about how the world was split into “real” and “apparent” ones and how it returned
- It uses his idea of genealogy (not covered in what was read). His progression encapsulates real philosophical ideas at different times.
- The use of the symbolism of night and day for the progression is related to Plato, whose Allegory of the Cave meant to show that the world of experience was not the real world. It shows that his philosophy was actually leading us back into the Cave, not into the light.

The standard interpretation of this passage has it that the first stage, representing Plato, is the first stage in the history of the error, because Plato introduces (via, e.g., the metaphor of “The Divided Line”) a split between the “apparent” and “real” worlds. From Stage 1 to Stage 4, the “real” world becomes increasingly inaccessible, to the point that we’re left with positivism’s view that “reality” is just an empty notion. The next stage presents the first stage of Nietzsche’s “perspectivism,” which provides a nihilistic view that there is *nothing but appearances* in their diversity. There is nothing weighty that grounds them; there are only the surface impressions of things we get from various perspectives. The final stage presents Nietzsche’s mature perspectivism, in which the idea of “the apparent world” is also rejected. What is left? Only *the world*, as we find ourselves in it. This world avoids the real-apparent, subject-object dualism that Plato introduced, and sets the stage for Heidegger’s anti-dualistic view in *Being and Time*.

An alternative interpretation, entertained in class, suggests that the *first* stage is actually the original unity, and the final stages, which represent reason eventually ending in nihilism, are only the problematic starting point from which we will be lead back to a unified picture. The apparent approval of these final stages is then *sarcasm* or *irony* on Nietzsche’s part. A variety of problems were raised for this passage, including the symbolism of sunrise and the parallelism that reveals the association between stage 1 and Plato versus stage 6 and Nietzsche’s preferred view. Nonetheless, in the end both interpretations arrive at the same point, which is the need for a non-dualistic understanding of life and our existence.

Passage: Morality as Anti-Nature section which starts on page 486 (goes to 492)

Matt brought attention to a section 4 of this passage, where the question was whether or not Nietzsche thinks that all moralities are against life?

- Moralities due keep people from following natural instincts. But what is so good about natural instincts? If everyone only followed their natural instincts, there would be lots of problems.
- Passages from that section are brought up to show that Nietzsche is not against all moralities, just ones like Christianity that are anti-life and attempt to destroy passion. As opposed to these stupid attempts to destroy passion, there could be natural moralities that encourage human flourishing and are life-affirming (middle section 5).
- It seems that the moralities Nietzsche is against are general and universalizing. It seem the ones he favors from the text (section 6) would be ones that are individualistic and would keep in mind the particularities and specifics of individuals and their lives. In the referenced section he criticizes moralities that condemn for their own sake rather than out of respect for life.
- It is human flourishing, not abstract duty, over which morality should be concerned, a kind of egoistic perfectionism
- His idea of ethics is definitely in the Greek tradition of how to live *your* life well, not in the modern tradition about abstract ideas of good, utility, and duty