Nietzsche: The Subject of Morality

Ross Poole

> It is to be *inferred* that there exist countless dark bodies close to the sun – such as we shall never see. This is, between ourselves, a parable; and a moral psychologist reads the whole starry script only as a parable and sign-language by means of which many things can be kept secret.
>
> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil.* # 196[1]

Parables are for concealing meaning, as well as displaying it. Morality is a network of signs, hieroglyphs, and secrets; like a dream, or a neurotic symptom, it always says both more and less than it claims. To recognise this is to call attention to the need, not just for a psychology of morals, but also for a semiology and a natural history; in a phrase, it calls for a 'genealogy' of morals.

What are the secrets kept by the 'starry script' of morality? One of Nietzsche's best known claims is that 'There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena' (BGE # 107; cp. WP # 258). But this is hardly news to us, nor, I suspect, to Nietzsche's contemporaries. Despite his boast that he was the first to formulate the 'insight' that 'there are no moral facts whatever' (TI, p. 55), this was over a century after Hume. Anyway, the impact of this claim is immediately overshadowed by that of the much larger thesis that in precisely the sense in which there are no moral facts, there are no facts of any kind: '... facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations' (WP # 481). Morality may be only an interpretation of the world, but so too is everything else. This includes science, and also Nietzsche's own view that science and morality are only interpretations (see, e.g., BGE # 14, # 22).

Nietzsche's view is not a relativist one: he certainly does not think that all interpretations are equally valid. Much of his energies were spent trying to demonstrate the unacceptability of certain interpretations, and in particular, to show that the moral interpretation of the world is not a tenable one and should be left behind: 'Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena, more precisely a *mis*interpretation' (TI, 'The "Improvers" of Mankind', 1; in PN, p. 501). The slogan 'Beyond Good and Evil' means beyond morality: the moral interpretation of the world is one which should be rejected. But why precisely should it be rejected? Is it on grounds of truth? or of morality? If so, as critics have always been keen to point out, there is more than a hint of self-refutation here. If there are no facts, how can we appeal to the concept of truth? And what moral reasons can we have for rejecting morality?

In order to answer these questions, we need to get clear about what has come to be called Nietzsche's 'perspectivism'.[2] All views of the world are the creations of a particular set of interests and a particular location with respect to the world: these determine which questions are asked, which insights are gained and which aspects are overlooked. There is no one perspective which can make good the claim to provide a privileged account of what the world is like. Some accounts may be more adequate than others – because they are more comprehensive, contain fewer internal inconsistencies, are more exciting and stimulating, are more aesthetically pleasing, or are more 'life enhancing'. However, this greater adequacy is achieved by developing a particular perspective, not by denying it. The insights of a particular perspective are the result of concentration; the price of these insights lies in what is overlooked. A perspective is a particular structure of knowledge; but it is also – and necessarily – a structure of ignorance. What is characteristic of most accounts is that they deny their perspectival character: they present themselves as the product, not of a particular point of view, but of how the world is – of the 'facts'. They claim knowledge, but deny a corresponding ignorance. They characteristically deny, or give a distorted account of, their own origins.

This provides some of the critical edge to the strategy Nietzsche calls 'genealogy'. In part, genealogy involves unpacking the desires and needs, hopes and fears which have found expression in a particular account of the world. Philosophy is a confession (BGE # 6); morality a sign-language of the emotions (BGE # 187). The genealogist must learn to read philosophy as a confession; discern the emotions represented in morality. Even the most impersonal discourse is the expression of a specific kind of psychic structure, and it is Nietzsche's task to uncover that structure. It is for this reason that he often refers to himself as a 'psychologist' (see, e.g., GS, Preface # 2, BGE # 23, # 196, etc.). But his enterprise is not – or not only – that of discerning the particular motives which might lead an individual to invent or subscribe to a particular view of the world. Nietzsche's enterprise is also an historical one: moralities, and metaphysical and religious doctrines are located with respect to specific historical contexts and political struggles. Yet the point of Nietzsche's stories is clearly not historical explanation in a conventional sense. It is rather to identify the cultural residues which continue to dominate individual and social life in order that they be understood and their power diminished. We may never overcome the past, but we may combat it, and genealogy is part of that struggle (see UM, 2, e.g. p. 76).

The stories which Nietzsche tells are more like fables than actual histories. He is impatient with detail, and not concerned to rebut alternative accounts. This is partly because he

is not concerned with the past as such, but the past as it is located in the cultural present. Here, there is no significant distinction between myth and history. Nor does – or could – Nietzsche claim any epistemological privilege for his genealogies: they are *his* stories, *his* truths and they are informed by *his* values. They do not so much say 'This is how things were', as 'This is how I see things'. Their critical dimension lies in the challenge they present to the reader to find and defend an alternative account. Often enough, even to attempt to meet this challenge is to risk defeat, as the existence of *any* genealogy will undercut the pretensions to universality and objectivity required to sustain the position being defended.

Perspectivism is a general epistemological position, and genealogy applies as much to science as it does to morality. However, while Nietzsche is often critical of the self-image of science, he does not – at least after his early writings – attack it with anything like the ferocity he directed at morality. Part of the difference seems to be that Nietzsche thought that science could survive the discovery of its own limitations; indeed, that it is likely that the achievements of science will be better appreciated when it is recognised to be a human creation, rather than a register of pre-existing facts. On the other hand, morality will not survive the discovery. It depends on its claim to a non-perspectival status; once this has gone, so too has morality. Nietzsche's position here is the reverse of what has become orthodoxy. For him, science can do without the claim to objectivity; morality cannot.[3]

Moral judgments present themselves as unconditional, i.e. not as conditioned by the particular desires, interests of the person who makes the moral judgment, but as something which must be accepted by everyone, whatever their interests or desires. In the Kantian language that Nietzsche despised, the dictates of morality are categorical, not hypothetical. The human need which finds expression in morality is 'the worst of all tastes, the taste for the unconditional' (BGE # 31). (Nietzsche would have been pleased by the claim of psychoanalysis that everything unconditional belongs to the pathological.) The good which is posited by morality is supposed to be a good for everyone; but this claim to universality is a fraudulent one. Goods belong to their owners: they are private possessions.

> 'Good' is no longer good when your neighbour takes it into his mouth. And how could there exist a 'common good'! The expression is a self-contradiction: what can be common has ever but little value. (BGE # 43).

This bogus universality is associated with another feature of moral evaluation, that it is characteristically dichotomous. Moralists, like metaphysicians, believe in 'antithetical values' (BGE # 2); they must falsify the complex and multivalued nature of reality. Whatever characteristics are selected as exemplifying the good, these will be found always to exist together with and to depend upon what is evil.

> Examine the lives of the best and most fruitful people and ask yourself whether a tree that is supposed to grow to a proud height can dispense with bad weather and storms; whether misfortune and external resistance, some kinds of hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, mistrust, hardness, avarice, and violence do not belong among the *favourable* conditions without which any great growth even of virtue is scarcely possible. (GS I # 19)

The alleged good of altruism is parasitic, Nietzsche argues, on egoism (GS I # 21); sickness is necessary for self-knowledge (GS III # 121); '"higher culture" is based on the spiritualisation and intensification of cruelty' (BGE # 229); the 'profoundest and sublimest form of love' grew from 'the trunk of that tree of vengefulness and hatred, Jewish hatred' (GM ! # 8). Everything of value will be found to depend at some stage of its history upon an opposed value; no system of morality has achieved dominance without the use of methods which are, by its own criteria, immoral:

> Everything praised as moral is identical in essence with everything immoral and was made possible, as in every development of morality, with immoral means and for immoral ends. (WP # 272)

The creation of new values always involves the destruction of other values: 'If a temple is to be erected, a temple must first be destroyed' (GM II # 24). The great moralists in history have had to be capable of equally great immorality as a necessary condition for their achievements. To advocate the good

and deplore the evil ignores their interdependence; it is also a recipe for mediocrity and stagnation. Belief in the antithetical values of morality is only possible on the basis of a wilful – indeed hypocritical – blindness.

The moral interpretation of the world presupposes the existence of agents who may be held morally accountable for their actions. It posits subjects who are distinct from but nevertheless causally responsible for what they do. Nietzsche argues that the freely willing moral subject is a fiction, though a deep-seated one. It is in part generated by the subject/predicate structure of language. In too literal-minded a fashion we transpose grammar onto the world, and suppose that there must be a subject underlying every attribute and every action, as if – to use Nietzsche's own example – there must be lightning apart from the flash (GM I # 13). Descartes' inference from the existence of a thought to a self whose business it is to think is based on just this assumption that the structure of language must mirror that of the world.

> 'There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks': this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as 'true *a priori*' our belief in the concept of substance – that when there is a thought there has to be something 'that thinks' is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. (WP # 484; cp. WP # 477, BGE # 17)[4]

There is no subject underlying our various beliefs, thoughts and actions; *a fortiori* there is no subject which is causally responsible for them.

What then is the self? Up to a point, Nietzsche's answer is similar to Hume's: it is nothing but a collection of sensations, passions, thoughts, and the like.[5] But far more than Hume, Nietzsche emphasises the existence of the body as the ground of these sensations, passions and so on. The I is not a mental I, but a bodily I:

> 'I', you say, and are proud of the word. But greater is that in which you do not wish to have faith – your body and its great reason: that does not say 'I', but does 'I'. (Z, I, 'On the Despisers of the Body', in PN, p. 146)

If anything, it is the body which feels, wills and thinks. But ultimately, the body too stands in need of unification. It could not on its own constitute the unity of the self. The various bodily passions, desires, needs and thoughts exist in diverse relations of compatibility, complementarity, tension, and contradiction. The unity of the self comes when an order of hierarchy and dominance is established amongst them. Certain desires establish their priority, and others fall into place beneath them.

The impression of freedom of the will is given because the self is constituted by the commanding will and takes pleasure in the obedience of the now subordinated aspects of the self.

> *L'effet, c'est moi*: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth; the ruling class identifies itself with the successes of the commonwealth. In all willing, it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis of ... a social structure contained of many 'souls'. (BGE # 19)

The I is not a discovery but a creation; it is the 'regency' which provides – if only for a time – the political resolution of an ongoing process of conflict and struggle, negotiation and alliance (cp. WP # 90). It both *is* an interpretation, and also defines the place *from which* interpretation takes place.[4] Like all interpretations, it is a structure of knowledge and ignorance: the I is not all there is to the self, nor does its knowledge exhaust what there is to be known about that self.

> The relative ignorance in which the regent is kept concerning individual activities and even disturbances within the communality is among the conditions under which rule is exercised. (WP # 492)

Nietzsche recommends that we bypass the government and communicate directly with the 'inferior parts' – especially the body – if we wish to gain better knowledge of the domain of the self.

There is no subject outside this process of conflict and resolution. Nor is there any reason to identify certain aspects as essential and others not. Domination and subordination there may be, as well as interpretation and emphasis; but essential and inessential, no. The self is the union, and there can be little sense in supposing that it has an existence apart from what it does. It will express itself in action, and in action experience the feeling of freedom. But this is not freedom of the will as the moralist understands it. It is the freedom of artists to create as they must:

> They know only too well that it is precisely when they cease to act 'voluntarily' and do everything of necessity that their feeling of freedom, subtlety, fullness of power, creative placing, disposing, shaping reaches its height – in short, that necessity and 'freedom of will' are then one in them. (BGE # 213)

It is also the freedom of the bird of prey to express its nature by carrying off the lamb (GM I # 13) and perhaps, of Nietzsche to pursue his 'campaign against morality' (EH, p. 290) into madness. It is a freedom which embraces necessity; it is a freedom which can do no other than what it does (cp. Luther: 'Here I stand, I can do no other').

The freely choosing moral subject is an interpretation of the complex phenomenon of self-creation, but a misinterpretation. But how does this misinterpretation arise? Grammar may suggest it, but is not the whole story. What desires and fears – what kind of will – find expression in this fiction? What is the genealogy of the moral subject?

Ultimately, the fiction of the moral subject is created and maintained by the practice of morality itself. Consider for a moment the story Nietzsche tells of the genesis of morality – or, more precisely, of what he sometimes calls 'herd' or 'slave' morality.

Once upon a time, there were two kinds of people, the masters and those over whom they ruled. The dominant morality – or better, the dominant mode of evaluation – was that of the master. It was an expression of his respect and esteem for himself: he judged himself to be 'good' and – consequently – what he did to be 'good'. There were others like himself – other masters – whom he also respected; they were worthy of a fight or friendship. Then there were those over whom he ruled: they were unlike him in all the respects that counted, and he marked this difference by designating them 'bad' (or 'base': '*schlecht*'). But the badness of his slaves was largely a matter of indifference to the master: he was concerned with pursuing his own life and creating his own values. The master did not claim universality for these values: they did not prescribe how others (and certainly not the slave)

ought to act; they simply described how he *did* act.

The slave, on the other hand, did not act; or, at least, his actions were subject to the command of his master. To act on his own behalf would be to deny his status as a slave, and this he was afraid to do. If the master's sentiment towards the slave was the 'pathos of difference', that of the slave towards the master was '*ressentiment*', the hatred nourished in those who were afraid to act.

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied their true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. (GM I # 10)

Slave morality is essentially reactive. It focusses on the object of its fear – the master – and designates what he does as 'evil ('*böse*'); the slave is, by contrast, 'good'. It thus reverses the values of the master. What for the master is good is precisely what for the slave is evil: the master himself, his superiority, and the characteristics which exemplify that superiority – worldly success, wealth, fame, pride, brutality, and the like. What for the master is bad is what is good for the slave: submissiveness, denial of the self, equality, enjoyment, the world. This is not a simple reversal of the content of values; their polarity is reversed also. For the master, the primary value is good, and what is not good is bad; for the slave, the primary value is evil, and what is not evil is good.

The 'revaluation of values' was commenced by the Jews and carried through by Christianity. Paradoxically, the slave revolt in morality which was brought about by the fear of action has come to dominate European moral sensibility. Fear and mediocrity has triumphed over courage and achievement. Almost all that is left of the noble morality is the image of the barbarian – in its most extreme form, the 'blond beast':

> One may be quite justified in continuing to fear the blond beast at the core of all noble races and in being on one's guard against it: but who would not a hundred times sooner fear where one can also admire than *not* fear but be permanently condemned to the repellent sight of the ill-constituted, dwarfed, atrophied, and poisoned. (GM I # 11)

For all his admiration for the masters, and his contempt for the herd and its morality, Nietzsche did not think of the contrast in antithetical terms. Here, as elsewhere, values do not come in simple oppositions. Thus, just because the man of *ressentiment* lacks the 'trust and openness with himself' which is characteristic of the noble, because he is 'neither upright nor naive nor honest and straightforward with himself', he acquires subtlety and complexity.

> A race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually *cleverer* than any noble race; it will also honour cleverness to a far greater degree. (GM I # 10)

> It was due to the 'priestly form of existence' that man first became an *interesting animal*, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil* – and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts. (GM I # 6)

The man of *ressentiment* hates; but he also fears, and therefore does not act. He internalises his hatred, which comes to pervade all that he thinks and does. The noble acts on his emotions; he also forgets. It is not simply that the action dissipates the emotion; it is rather that forgetting is a sign of strength: it clears the way to live one's own life and create one's own values (GM II # 1). The slave does not act, and does not have the strength to forget; so he remembers. Nietzsche remarks tellingly that the Christian knows how to forgive, but not how to forget.[6] The I is in part constituted by the continuing hatred and the memory of past injuries. This I, the subject of morality, has a continuity and an intensity of focus not available to the noble. It is also constituted by frustrated desire: the I is not what it would be. The subject of morality is in part defined by the gap between 'is' and 'ought'.

The master does not draw such a distinction, either for himself or for the slave. His judgement that the slave is bad (or base) does not imply that the slave ought to be different. He would probably not make much sense of the idea: the slave *is* weak, and *is* a slave. The slave, on the other hand, thinks that what the master does *is* evil, i.e. that he ought not to do what he does. Nietzsche's account of this reasoning is worth quoting at length:

> To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength. A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect – more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a 'subject', can it appear otherwise. For just as the popu-

lar mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength and not to do so. But there is no such substratum: there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything. (GM I # 13)

We might say that *ressentiment* creates a new kind of subject: the subject of morality.[7] However, we should keep in mind Nietzsche's insistence that the subject of morality is a fiction, a misinterpretation of the complex phenomena of subjectivity. It is a misinterpretation engendered by weakness. The failure of the man of *ressentiment* to act on his hatred expresses his weakness just as the actions of the noble express his strength; but both are interpreted by morality, not as expressions of character, but acts of choice.

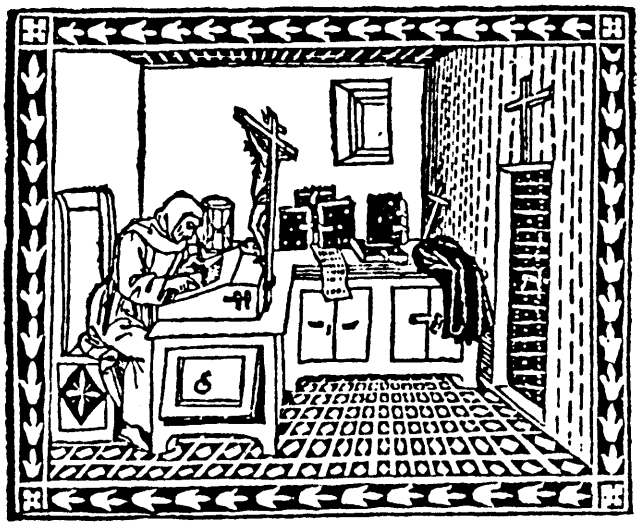
The distinction between action and the (moral) self is a special case of the metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality. The world of appearance is given to the senses, while reality is apprehended by the use of reason. According to Nietzsche it has, at least since Socrates, been the special responsibility of philosophers to make use of this faculty in order to establish the characteristics of the real world (TI, especially the first three chapters; in PN, pp. 473-86). What they have done is smuggled into their characterisation of the real world just those features which are necessary to justify the existence of morality. Reality provides the ground and the ultimate meaning of the world of appearance. Metaphysics provides the guarantee that reality is on the side of morality.

Something of the force of Nietzsche's position here emerges if we consider Kant's 'proof' of the existence of God in the second *Critique*.[8] Kant argues that even though the motive of the moral agent must not be his/her own happiness, there must be some rational expectation that those who do their duty will eventually be rewarded with the happiness they deserve. In other words, there must be some connection between moral agents acting as they ought, and thus deserving happiness, and their actually achieving it. If there were no such connection, or perhaps – as empirical evidence might tend to suggest – a negative one, it is hard to see how morality could continue as a going concern. We cannot have such a rational expectation that individuals will be rewarded as they ought unless we postulate the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. Kant also argues that the actions of individuals doing their duty as (and because) they ought must also contribute in some way to the historical progress of human societies towards well-being and – more important for Kant – freedom.[9] Again, we cannot have such a rational expectation unless we can assume that the universe is governed according to a moral law, and on the final analysis this requires that we believe in God.

It is important to recognise that these arguments are not mere aberrations. Despite – or because of – his insistence on a non-consequentialist account of duty, Kant recognised that individual morality also requires that individuals be able to locate their actions and their lives in some larger order. There must be some intelligible connections between people obeying the moral law, and at the same time making sense of their lives in terms of their own destiny and a more comprehensive world order. Certainly a stoic withdrawal from the temporal world is possible; but even this only makes sense if we suppose, as the stoics did, that such a withdrawal is in line with a larger cosmology. We can make sense of the demands of individual morality only if we locate it within a more encompassing narrative.

According to Nietzsche, it has been the task of reason – of philosophy, or metaphysics – to discern this larger order. A crucial step in this task has been the denigration of the world as it is revealed to sense-experience. This has become the world of (mere) appearance, and thus of unreality, in contrast with the intelligible world revealed by reason. Reason discovers a cosmic order and purpose; if not the existence of God, at least of a God like order working through history. In this grander scenario, disaster and tragedy find their larger meaning. The suffering individual is compensated, or the suffering is located in this more comprehensive story. The evil are punished, or their evil explained as necessary for some greater good.

Nietzsche's claim is that, even if accounts such as these were once believable, they no longer are. In large part this was because of the development of modern science. Nietzsche was certainly susceptible to the positivist claim that metaphysics and religion had tried to do badly what modern science did well. Indeed, he suggested that positivism was an important step on the route towards the overthrow of metaphysics (TI, 'How the "True World" finally became a Fable'; in PN, pp. 485-86). Still, when it came to the point his position was not a simple advocacy of science against metaphysics. After all, the dispute between science and metaphysics cannot be for Nietzsche a simple matter of truth vs. falsity. Both are interpretations; neither can claim truth in any simple sense. Metaphysics and religion fail because they cannot do without the claim to a truth which is absolute and unique. Truth is their own value, and one they cannot give us.



Genealogy serves its purpose here too. The drive towards metaphysics and religion is the drive to deny the world. It is because the man of *ressentiment* will not act on the world that he denies the need to act on it: the real world, if not the world of appearance, is as he would want it to be.

> Whoever does not know how to lay his will into things at least lay some *meaning* into them: that means, he has the faith that they already obey a will. (Principle of 'faith'). (TI, 'Maxims and Arrows', 18; in PN, p. 469; cp. WP # 585)

The task of reason is to establish that the world has the characteristics that a more active will would seek to create. *Ressentiment* is *re*active; its strength is turned back on itself and becomes thought. As reason it operates to undermine the

faith of the masters in their own unreflective judgement (see TI, 'The problem of Socrates', in PN, pp. 473-79). More positively, its role is to create a more real world. Reason can only serve these purposes if it operates behind the mask of impersonality and if its results have the appearance of objectivity. The claim to truth is essential to this enterprise.

The development of science has exposed this claim. It can now only be maintained at the price of hypocrisy, concealment – of lies. It is now the task of the genealogist to turn its own values against the moral interpretation of the world. The morality of truth turns out to be a lie. It has devalued itself. We must now give up morality for its own mendacity, and perhaps also give up the moral value of truth.

> Among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective - (WP # 5)

The failure of the moral interpretation of the world leads directly to nihilism (WP # 1.2). This is the loss of value – of meaning and purpose in life – not through the application of higher values, but through a form of self-destruction. The highest values have devaluated themselves (WP # 2).

According to Nietzsche, nihilism is the destiny of the modern world – or at least of its 'next two centuries'. Even though only some have so far glimpsed that fate, its history 'can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here' (WP, Preface # 2). Nietzsche draws an important distinction between two kinds of nihilism:

> Nihilism. It is *ambiguous*.
> A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism.
> B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism.

Passive nihilism is one of the forms in which nihilism is first experienced: its symptom is pessimism (e.g. Schopenhauer). Passive nihilism is the recognition of the failure of morality to provide values and purposes to guide one's life. There is no world revealed by reason which provides a context for one's individual strivings; there is no larger web of meanings with which one can identify; nor is there a final goal towards which human history is heading (WP # 12(A)). The pessimist – the passive nihilism – says: There are no meanings of this kind, but there ought to be. The failure of the moral interpretation is experienced as a loss.

To which Nietzsche responds: If there is no morality, there is no 'ought to be'.

> The philosophical nihilist is convinced that all that happens is meaningless and in vain; and that there ought not be anything meaningless and in vain. But whence this: there ought not to be? From where does one get *this* 'meaning', this 'standard'? (WP # 36)

While passive nihilism pretends to reject the moral interpretation of the world, it secretly accepts it. The moral interpretation lingers on in the attitude that the loss of morality and meaning *is* a loss, and that these *ought* to exist. Passive nihilism is morality's last desperate stand.

Active nihilism does not merely accept the loss of morality. It celebrates it. The self-refutation of the moral interpretation of the world is not a loss, but a triumph; an achievement of spirit, and a liberation. In place of pessimism, its attitude is one of joyfulness: it is the 'gay science'. Positive nihilism is not a return to master morality. That is no longer possible. It is a call for new values, not a reaffirmation of the old. But the values it seeks will, like those of the master, be particular and not universal, and will be created by will and not discovered by reason.

Nietzsche calls for 'new philosophers', 'free spirits' to meet the challenge of nihilism, not to overcome it, but, by pushing it beyond its limits, to turn its No into a Yes. Passive nihilism retains the perspective of morality: it continues to say No to the world, though it has lost the right to say Yes to

anything else. The active nihilist must say No to morality, and Yes to the world. The world, and everything in it – life, change, temporality, misery, sickness, horror, transient happiness, occasional glory – must be accepted, despite the lack of any larger meaning or cosmic purpose. Of course, the 'free spirit' will also act, and in acting strive to affirm its values. Such actions have significance, not because of what they achieve, but what they are. Like the world of which they are a part, they exist, and therein lies their value.

There is a limit to what can be achieved by action. In particular, it cannot change the past. This might seem to be a limitation of will: 'The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy' (Z, Part II, 'On Redemption'; in PN, p. 251). But the power of will may be exercised other than in action. If we cannot change the past by acting on it, we may do so by reconceiving it. We may 'put our will into things', not just by changing them, but also by changing our perspective and re-interpreting them. Interpretation is a manifestation of will. To accept what one cannot change is to will that it be so.

> 'The will is a creator.' All 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident – until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I will it.' Until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I will will it; thus shall I will it.' (Z, Part II, 'On Redemption'; in PN, p. 253)

Positive nihilism creates this new perspective on the world: one acts *as* one must, and accepts *what* one must. For the free spirit, there is no value above existence, no ought to be except what is.

To say Yes to the world is not merely to accept it; it is also to celebrate it. The re-interpretation required by Nietzsche is not just a matter of new words, but of a new life: one in which one loves what exists, even in its utmost horror or banality.

> He who has really gazed ... into the most world-denying of all possible modes of thought – beyond good and evil and no longer, like Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and illusion of morality – perhaps by that very act, and without really intending to, may have had his eyes opened to the opposite ideal: to the ideal of the most exuberant, most living and world-affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again *as it was and is* to all eternity, insatiably calling out *da capo*

[i.e. again from the beginning] not only to himself but to the whole piece and play. (BGE # 56)

This is the ideal of eternal recurrence; it is both the consequence and the test of positive nihilism. The free spirit must celebrate existence by willing that it recur, or – *what is the same thing* – interpreting the world as embodying such a pattern of recurrence.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence is the ultimate denial of meaning and purpose:

> Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: '*the eternal recurrence*'. (WP # 55)

But it is a denial which has become an affirmation. It is a way of saying Yes to what exists, as not needing any other validation than that which is provided by existence itself. It accepts the identity of the ought and the is; it recognises that the only universal is the particular, and it affirms – and lives – the identity of the eternal with the transient and the temporal.

In a world without God, the eternal recurrence is the closest we can get to redemption:

> To redeem what is past in man and to recreate all 'it was' until the will says, 'Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it' – this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption. (Z, III, 'On Old and New Tablets', 3; in PN, p. 310; cf. also Z, II, 'On Redemption'; in PN, pp. 249-54)

But it is a redemption which is not easily earned. Zarathustra was the teacher of eternal recurrence; but he also recoiled from it. It was his 'abysmal thought', the cause of nausea and disgust; it was his destiny, but also his danger and sickness (Z, III, 'The Convalescent', p. 327, pp. 331-32). When, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche first proclaims the doctrine, he imagines two responses to the 'demon' who brings the news:

> Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. (GS, IV # 341)

To respond to the demon as a divine messenger means not merely loving the world in all its horror and banality, but taking responsibility for it. This is to become a god oneself; to live the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is to live as if there were no world which is not one's own creation and re-creation. To respond to the demon with anguish, to receive the news he conveys as 'the greatest weight' (GS # 341; see also Z, III, 'On the Vision and the Riddle'; in PN, pp. 267-72) is to lose oneself in a world without meaning or purpose; it is to 'go under', not for rebirth as the near divine '*ubermensch*', but to annihilation.

The culmination of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality is to confront the moral subject with the choice between divinity and disintegration. The story of Zarathustra is largely the story of his struggle between these alternatives. Zarathustra must come to terms with the demonic or divine message of the eternal recurrence. He must recognise the world in all its meanness, emptiness and cruelty, but learn to love it – and himself – not as a duty (this would be to return to the standpoint of morality), but as a joy and a triumph.

If this is the story of Zarathustra, what of the story teller? If Nietzsche's genealogy culminates in the struggle between divinity and annihilation, what were the struggles of the genealogist? If, like other philosophy, Nietzsche's 'moral psychology' was 'a confession on the part of its author' (BGE # 6), it too stands in need of a moral psychologist.

We need to be careful here. A confession conceals as much as it reveals. Zarathustra was, at most, one of Nietzsche's masks. But even a mask reveals more than a 'hidden man' would desire. If *Zarathustra* was written in blood (see Z, I, 'On Reading and Writing', in PN, p. 152), the blood was Nietzsche's own. The author of *Zarathustra* lived the same struggle that he defined for his protagonist – between becoming a god and disintegration. His last but one book was the divine or blasphemous autobiography, *Ecce Homo*. His final destiny can – appropriately enough – be read in both ways: as divinity or annihilation. To some extent this is due to the secrecy and ambiguity of the madness which was Nietzsche's final mask. But it is also because the two possible outcomes of the struggle waged by Nietzsche, the alternative between which he lived and wrote, are not opposed but identical.[10]

Notes

1 References to Nietzsche's work will be given in the text as follows:

BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973; reprinted 1976)

EH *Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, in *On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo* (NY, Vintage Books, 1969)

GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, in *On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo*

GS *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (NY, Vintage Books, 1974)

PN *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (London, Chatto & Windus, 1971)

TI *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, in PN

UM *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983)

WP *Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (NY, Vintage Books, 1968)

Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, in PN

2 In what follows, I am indebted – even at some points of disagreement – to Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1985), especially Chapter 2. See also Paul Redding, 'Nietzschean Perspectivism and the Logic of Practical Reason', *Philosophical Forum* (forthcoming).

3 For a sophisticated defence of the more orthodox view that science both needs and can make good a claim to objectivity, whilst morality neither needs nor can have it, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, Fontana Press/Collins, 1985), Chapter 8.

4 Paul de Man has drawn attention to a discrepancy between Nietzsche's assertion in GM 1, #10, that 'the "doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything', and WP, #477, which holds that 'the deed as well as the doer are fictions'. De Man is probably right to argue that the second passage is Nietzsche's more considered view, but he tries to make too much of the point. Nietzsche's rejection of the distinction between the subject and its actions (doer and deed, substance and attribute) abolishes the *philosophical* category of action (deed, attribute), because the philosophi-

cal category is parasitic on the distinction. In a parallel way, Nietzsche's rejection of the distinction between 'reality' (truth, being) and 'appearance' abolishes the philosophical category of appearance. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense in which Nietzsche considers that actions and appearances have a reality which the subject (substance, reality) does not. See Paul de Man, 'Action and Identity in Nietzsche', in *Yale French Studies # 52: Graphesis: Perspectives in Literature and Philosophy*, pp. 16-30.

5 See Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888; reprinted 1967), Book I, Part IV, Chapter VI, pp. 251-263.

6 At least, I *think* that Nietzsche says this somewhere; I am at present unable to locate the precise place. There is a similar thought in Stevie Smith's poem 'I forgive you':

> I forgive you, Maria,
> Things can never be the same,
> But I forgive you, Maria,
> Though I think you were to blame.
> I forgive you, Maria,
> I can never forget
> But I forgive you, Maria
> Kindly remember that.

From *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* (London, Virago, 1984).

7 I have been influenced here and probably elsewhere by an interesting paper by Rosalyn Diprose: 'Nietzsche, Ethics and Sexual Difference', *RP* 52, Summer 1989.

8 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by L. W. Beck (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), Book II: Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason, especially Chapters IV and V, pp. 126-136.

9 See 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', translated by H. B. Nisbet, in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970; reprinted 1977).

10 My thanks to Lisabeth During and Paul Redding for comments and discussion.