

# **FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: SOCIAL ORIGIN OF MORALS, CHRISTIAN ETHICS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ATHEISM IN HIS *THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS***

**Marian Hillar**

Published in the Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism, Vol. 16 (1) Spring-Summer 2008. American Humanist Association, Washington, DC, pp. 59-84.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) belongs among the most misunderstood or most enigmatic writers of philosophy. Nietzsche was educated in Leipzig where he was under influence of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. He was appointed professor of classical philology in Basel in 1869. He remained there until 1879 when he resigned from his post for health reasons. His philosophical production was not very abundant (e.g. *Human, All Too Human*, 1878) before his retirement. After his retirement he became more involved in philosophical studies and published several works: *Daybreak* (1881), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), *The Antichrist* (1895), and *Ecce Homo* (published posthumously in 1908). His works represent trends and anxieties of his epoch which was rich in new approaches: development of new studies in science such as the discovery made by Darwin and the publication of his two most influential books, *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1872), a critical analysis of the evils of capitalism, new studies in comparative religions, and new studies in literary biblical criticism. Such intellectual enterprise gave rise to critical attitudes and abandonment of traditional ways of thinking and created a void which was succinctly formulated by Nietzsche in his famous expression, the "death of god." Undoubtedly, Nietzsche, influenced by the pessimism of Schopenhauer, searched for new ways to overcome it, to fill the created void and find an affirmation of life. He was often characterized as a "nihilist" because he described the void produced by the collapse of the traditional system of values and worldview. But, on the contrary, by formulating the "death of god" which meant the abandonment of everything that related to the god-hypothesis, Nietzsche postulated a rethinking of the human

existence, knowledge, morality, and elaborating a new account based on naturalistic analysis and affirmation of life. This program was the only tenable alternative to nihilism. His writing, however, is not organized in a form of systematic treatises, rather, it is a collection of observations, comments and loosely connected thoughts.

Among the major trends of Nietzsche's philosophy we may list the following:

1. Nietzsche considered that human thought has basically an evaluative and interpretative character and called for a new assessment of all previous interpretations including a reevaluation of previous values and an analysis of their genealogy, hence the title of one of his works.
2. It seems that under the influence of developing science, he recognized the temporality of all human knowledge which offered nevertheless a certain perspective on the relationship between things and the ideas.
3. In his search for truth and knowledge Nietzsche postulated the use of naturalistic epistemology in place of the traditional religious and metaphysical. He advocated abandonment of the god-hypothesis as an "unworthy belief," a product of "naïveté, error, all too-human need and ulterior motivation." He rejected as well the notion of substantial soul and "self-contained things." He considered such notions linguistic shorthand representing the natural processes.
4. Nietzsche certainly read the works of Charles Darwin and was impressed by them. He considered the world as undergoing constant organization and reorganization in an evolutionary process. He described this process as "will to power" which produces new relationships, perhaps, by analogy to the idea of Lamarck who postulated a certain "élan vital" as a driving motor for the evolutionary process. "This world is the will to power – and nothing besides, and you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides."
5. Nietzsche visualized the world as being without a beginning and end, and formulated this idea in an aphorism of an "eternal return" which meant that things happen repeatedly in a linear fashion.
6. He considered human nature and societies in naturalistic terms emphasizing the importance of social structures and interactions. The characteristic feature of his sociology was the possibility of development of humans with a special creativity whom he called "higher men," or "supermen." They would be responsible for the enrichment of humanity with cultural life. This attainment of life would be an expression at the highest level permitted by creativity and the transformation of human existence from nihilism to integrating the human condition with the world.

### **The First Essay. "Good and Evil", "Good and Bad" and the Critique of Christian Ethics**

The topic of *The Genealogy of Morals* is “the provenance of our moral prejudices,” as Nietzsche himself states, and he considers the present work as a continuation of the theme begun in his *Human, All Too Human*. This topic was of interest to philosophers and theologians, but Darwin was among the first who in modern times posed this question in the context of natural sciences. The answer was not possible in the nineteenth century – only today the development of neuroscience and psychology allows us to approach it from a scientific perspective (e.g., work of Marc D. Hauser). Nevertheless, Nietzsche proposed this topic for prizes for essays on the evaluation of moral ideas: “All sciences are now under an obligation to prepare the ground for the future task of the philosopher, which is to solve the problem of value, to determine the true hierarchy of values.”

Nietzsche from an early age was interested in the provenance of morals and ethics. The question of evil in the world was of primary importance and Nietzsche resolved it by separating it from theological inquiry to the question “Under what conditions did man construct the value judgments *good* and *evil*”? And, what was their effect on human lives? This implied that we humans are responsible for the creation of our value systems through our own doings.

His own thoughts were opposed to the ideas which were developed on the origin of morals by the English writer Paul Rée. Nietzsche also opposed the ideas of Schopenhauer who transcendentalized as absolute values such things as “non-egotistical instincts, the instincts of compassion, self-denial, and self-sacrifice.” He especially was concerned with the “overestimation of pity” which he considered a debilitating and sinister symptom of European civilization. And it was held in the lowest esteem by most philosophers. He suggests a reevaluation of moral values and search for the conditions from which they developed as a consequence and also the results it produced. We assume that the “good” man represents a higher value than the “evil” one, but what if the “good” man represented a “narcotic” preventing the development of the future? Here Nietzsche injects his vision of the future development of man into a superior being, the *Übermensch*.

The book is divided into three essays of which the first, entitled “*Good and Evil*,” “*Good and Bad*,” is the subject of our essay. The only psychologists who posed the question of the origin of morals were the English writers who, however, derived e.g., altruism from praise for their actions by their beneficiaries which later became a habit. Nietzsche is criticizing here the utilitarian explanation of ethics that altruistic deeds were originally committed for their usefulness and later their usefulness was forgotten.

The other theory which is equally untenable is that of Herbert Spencer who claimed that the concept *good* was the same as the concepts *useful* and *practical*.

Nietzsche argues that the notion of *good* did not derive from those who benefited from the good, but it was the good themselves who declared themselves and their actions to be good. The source of the distinction between *good* and *bad* being in the aristocratic class contrasted with the lower classes. There was no need to associate the altruistic deeds with the word good, since it was the temper of the dominant ruling class. That differentiation came about when the aristocratic values began to decline and the people became aware of the dichotomy egotism-altruism. Nietzsche next explains the derivation of the concept *good* from the concept *noble* in the hierarchical, class sense, and the concept *bad* from the notions *common*, *plebeian*, *base*. He gives as an example the etymology of the word *schlecht* (bad) which was used for a long time until the Thirty Years War interchangeably with the word *schlicht* (simple) to designate the commoner as distinct from the nobleman. Only later it acquired a contemptuous connotation. Further support for his hypothesis Nietzsche derives from the words which were used by the ruling classes to describe themselves – *arya* (= rich, possessor also truthful, in the Iranian and Slavic languages); the words *esthlos* (= having true reality, later truthful in Greek) and *agathos* describing aristocracy was contrasted with *kakos* and *deilos* for plebeians; similarly in Latin *malus* (or *melas*) might designate a dark-haired commoner or pre-Aryan settler of the Indian soil; the Latin *bonus* (good) which he interprets as meaning a warrior, Nietzsche derives from *bellum* (war). Also the priestly class would be classified by Nietzsche as the *pure* and contrasted with the *impure* originally in the physical sense as the one who washed himself and avoided certain foods that entailed skin disease. From such neurasthenia and morbidity of the priestly class derived dietary restrictions, fasting, and sexual continence. What is interesting is that Nietzsche recognizes that among that priestly class the human mind was able to develop profound as well as evil thoughts. These two classes, the aristocracy and priests, developed with time opposite systems of valuations. The priestly class is generally characterized by Nietzsche as “the most evil enemies” one could have, precisely, because they are the greatest haters in history but also the most intelligent.

Now referring in general terms to Christian ethics, the ethics of love, Nietzsche characterizes it as the ethics of slaves which is a result of the vengeance and hatred exerted by the Jewish race. It was a “debilitating narcotic power the symbol of the ‘holy cross,’ the ghastly paradox of a crucified god, the unspeakably cruel mystery of God’s self-crucifixion for the benefit of mankind.” In this way everything became Judaized or Christianized, and the ethics of the common man triumphed in the world. This gave birth to values. In a truly aristocratic society morality grows out of triumphant self-affirmation of the sort, “We nobles, good, beautiful, happy ones.” It goes necessarily with action and leads to an active life stance. The

aristocratic valuation can go amiss too and do violence, but only to those aspects of life they do not know. As an example of such a noble representing this type of ethics Nietzsche gives Mirabeau “who lacked all memory for insults and meanness done to him, and who was unable to forgive because he had forgotten.” The noble man respects his enemies and that respect allows him to speak of “loving one’s enemy.” But Nietzsche does not spare the critique of the noble races: “For these same men ... when once they step outside their circle become little better than uncaged beasts of prey.” And he gives a short historical survey of how various tribes and nations behaved in the past. Though he does not condone this behavior he prefers it to the “current state of affairs” characterized by “leveling and retribution.” Perhaps he refers to the Marxist and socialist movements of his epoch.

The slave ethics derives, on the other hand, from the rancorous reaction to the “outside;” it requires an outside sphere different and hostile. Happiness in this ethical system is passive and derives from tranquility, emotional slackness: “the rancorous person is neither truthful nor ingenuous nor honest and forthright with himself. His soul squints; his mind loves hide-outs, secret paths, and back doors; everything that is hidden seems to him his own world, his security, his comfort; he is expert in silence, in long memory, in waiting, in provisional self-depreciation, and in self-humiliation.” Such a person requires an enemy who is a true product of his conception as and “evil enemy” and he contrasts him with himself as the “good one.”

Nietzsche complains that this ethics dominates: “The leveling and diminution of European man is our greatest danger: because the sight of him makes us despondent. ... We no longer see anything these days that aspires to grow greater; instead, we have a suspicion that things will continue to go downhill, becoming ever thinner, more placid, smarter, cosier, more ordinary, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian – without doubt man is getting “better” all the time. ... This is Europe’s true predicament: together with the fear of man we have also lost the love of man, reverence for man, confidence in man, indeed the *will to man*.” And he defines this situation as *nihilism*.

Nietzsche summarizes his views on the origins of ethics by giving an example of the lambs and the birds of prey: “There is nothing very odd about lambs disliking birds of prey, but this is no reason for holding it against large birds of prey that they carry off lambs.” And “These birds of prey are evil, and does not this give us a right to say that whatever is the opposite of a bird of prey must be good?” Such ethics reduces us to doing no violence, no retaliation, leaving vengeance to God, shunning evil, being patient and humble. It requires a complicity of impotence and belief that a free subject chooses a meritorious act. It translates weakness into merit and forgiveness, impotence into kindness, pusillanimity into humility, submission before those one hates into obedience to god. No doubt, Nietzsche criticizes

Christian ethics here. The most important is that in spite of such ideals it ends up with hatred and vengeance against all those who are not on their side: “Now I can make out what they seem to have been saying all along; ‘We, the good ones, are also the just ones.’ They call the things they seek not retribution but the triumph of justice; the thing they hate is not their enemy, by no means – they hate injustice, ungodliness; the thing they hope for and believe in is not vengeance, the sweet exultation of vengeance ... but ‘the triumph of God, who is just, over the godless’; what remains to them to love on this earth is not their brothers in hatred, but what they call their ‘brothers in love’ – all who are good and just. And what do they call that which comforts them in all their sufferings – their phantasmagoria of future bliss? ... They call it Judgment Day, the coming of their kingdom, the ‘Kingdom of God.’” And what is it that Christians hope for, have faith for and love? Nietzsche gives as an answer the gruesome description of the joy to Christians offered by the spectacle of the Day of Judgment which can be found in Tertullian’s *De spectaculis*. On this day all the generations of unbelievers will be consumed by fire. “What sight shall wake my wonder, what laughter, my joy and exultation as I see all those kings, those great kings, welcomed (we are told) in heaven, along with Jove, along with those who told of their ascent, groaning in the depth of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus, liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians! Those sages, too, those philosophers blushing before their disciples as they blaze together, the disciples whom they taught that God was concerned with nothing, that men have no souls at all, or that what souls they have shall never return to their former bodies!” And he calls the *Book of Revelation* the “most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history.”

### **The Second Essay: “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience’ and Related Matters.”**

In the second Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche attempts to describe the origin in the human psyche of “guilt” or “bad conscience” as an expression of moral rule, the evolution of punishment and its purpose and draws a far reaching conclusion about the consequences of these feelings. The feeling of guilt derives, according to Nietzsche, from the faculty in humans which is to make promises but at the same time we have a defense mechanism, oblivion which operates by keeping clean our mental functions and clear and quiet our consciousness. Without it happiness or serenity may not be possible. This power, however, can be superseded by another which is remembering. The operation of remembering requires, however, learning to “calculate” by which Nietzsche understands making moral judgments.

And this is the generation of the faculty of responsibility. That is, the final step in the moral analysis or moral development of man. These two things are not clearly differentiated, nevertheless by achieving this man becomes an autonomous agent leaving behind the “straight jacket” of moral customs. Man then, according to Nietzsche, acquires freedom, a sense of power, and is burdened with a sense of responsibility. At the same time he inspires trust, fear, and reverence among his peers. The awareness of his responsibility man will call his conscience. Such a conclusion reminds us of the autonomous categorical imperative of Kant (1724-1804) by virtue of which humans become moral lawgivers and subject to their own law.

Now Nietzsche speculates on the mechanism of the development of this conscience. It has a long history of transformation. He links it with memory in the early stages of human development, with that that is painful: “A thing is branded on the memory to make it stay there; only what goes on hurting will stick.” Thus it was developed because of the experience of torture, sacrifice, and bloodshed, cruel religious rituals (which have their origin in the instinct that pain is the strongest factor to produce memory). Their purpose was moral teaching. Germany was not an exception in this past; nevertheless he places Germany as “one European nation among whom is still to be found a maximum of trust, seriousness, insipidity, and matter-of-factness, which should entitle us to breed a mandarin caste for all of Europe.” In search for the origin of guilt or bad conscience, Nietzsche advises us to discard the approach done by other philosophers as useless, because they did not have a historical perspective. Just as previously he derived the concept of good and evil from the linguistic analysis, so now he refers to the moral term *Schuld* (=guilt) as derived from the commercial term *Schulden*(=to be indebted). The feeling of guilt is thus a product of the oldest relationship between humans, that of “buyer and seller, creditor and debtor.” With this origin is linked the concept of punishment as compensation for the contractual relation between debtor and creditor. Damage produced by not keeping a contract results in a rage and for every damage some equivalent for compensation may be found, even in inflicting pain.

In older civilizations drastic pledges were made by the debtor in order to guarantee fulfillment of the promise. These compensations were in the form of inflicting bodily harm through which the creditor, in place of material compensation such as land or money, was receiving pleasure. Later this punitive authority was passed on to the legal authority and the creditor then enjoyed seeing the debtor despised and mistreated.

Thus through such a process of contracts and legal obligations these moral concepts were developed: guilt, conscience, duty. And Nietzsche ponders that even not long ago the pain was brought to a level of apotheosis characterizing the whole history of higher culture, for example public celebrations associated with executions, tortures, *autos da fé*.

Now Nietzsche draws awkward conclusions that during the old times when inflicting pain was considered a pleasure, life was more enjoyable than today since people were not ashamed of their cruelty; today life is pessimistic. Moreover he suggests that then pain was not so hurtful as is today. He makes an assumption that even today pleasure exists in suffering in a sublimated form in imaginative or psychological terms. In the old days it was a spectacle which was not a senseless neither is it today. It is Interesting that Nietzsche links with this ancient spectacle an invention of the gods – they would witness any unseen suffering, a spectacle edifying to the gods (e.g., the Trojan War and similar atrocities; or the heroism of Heracles and other Greek heroes). Here Nietzsche is quite on target anticipating modern psychological studies where the invention of gods is necessary for natural moral instincts (e.g., the study of Pascal Boyer). However, he stops short of taking this step and that constitutes a limitation of his take on the origin of morals.

He insists on the origin of morals as deriving from this “oldest and most primitive relationship between human beings, that of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor.” This is the basis of the social context of humans which is the essence of moral behavior. “Here, for the first time, the individual stood and measured himself against individual.” And Nietzsche summarizes his conclusions: “Here we find the oldest variety of human acuteness, as well as the first indication of human pride, of superiority over other animals ... man saw himself as the being that measures values, the ‘assaying’ animal. Purchase and sale, together with their psychological trappings, antedate even the rudiments of social organization and covenants. From its rudimentary manifestation of interpersonal law, the incipient sense of barter, contract, guilt, right, obligation, and compensation was projected onto the crudest communal complexes (and their relations to such complexes) together with the habit of measuring power against power.” The other direction led humans through grand generalizations to postulation of “the oldest and naïvest moral canons of justice, of all ‘fair play,’ ‘good will,’ and ‘objectivity.’”

In the next parts of his essay Nietzsche now approaches the problem of how punishment evolved in society. In the early society, a debtor who lived in a group enjoyed the privileges associated with this membership. When he broke the contract, he at the same time broke his pledge to the group and forfeited all the benefits and amenities of the community. His infraction produced the rage of the creditor, rejection from the community and thus every kind of hostility could be applied to him. The punishment mimicked the attitude toward a conquered and hated enemy. When the societies grew in wealth and power, the situation changed – the offender no longer represented a danger and his treatment became more lenient, rules were introduced which led to the development of the penal code, justice, and its self-canceling mechanism called *mercy*.



Other philosophers attempted to trace the source of justice to other sources. Nietzsche strongly opposes the view of E. K. Dühring (1883-1921) who proposed as the source of justice reactive emotions. "The doctrine of vengeance is the red thread that runs through my entire investigation of justice." On the contrary, says Nietzsche, the just man remains just even under the stress of harm done to him and will not seek vengeance. And he supports his point by a historical argument. Laws were developed just in order to regulate the senseless rage of rancor. Only with the establishment of laws can one talk of "right" and "wrong." He maintains that from the biological point of view a legal system is an exceptional condition, since it limits the natural life-will acting in the direction of power, but which must serve, in the final analysis, the collective purpose. Thus it is only an instrument which regulates the struggle for power complexes in the society of individuals. In this statement, Nietzsche also rejects the notion of Dühring which he considers a communist cliché that "every will must regard every other will as its equal" as demoralization.

Another problem associated with punishment is the origin of the purpose of punishment. Nietzsche takes quite a Darwinian perspective denying any purpose or goal in the cultural or biological evolution of "a thing, custom, an organ." He postulates instead that "it is a sequence of more or less profound, more or less independent processes of appropriation, including the resistances used in each instance, the attempted translocations for purposes of defense or reaction, as well as the results of successful counterattacks." In the final analysis Nietzsche clings to his concept of progression in the form of the will tending toward "greater power" and at the expense of "lesser powers." It does not seem, however, that he advocates the Spencerian view of society rather, he expresses the role of a psychic trait, *activity* in contrast to mere reactivity which is a passive trait which he labels as *adaptation*.

The meaning and purpose of punishment underwent various changes in history and in various societies. Nietzsche gives a long list of such meanings emphasizing their utilitarian purpose: punishment as "rendering the offender harmless and preventing his doing further damage;" as "the payment of damages to the injured party;" as "isolating of a disequilibrating agent;" as "a means of inspiring fear;" as "the elimination of a degenerate element;" as "a means of creating memory;" as "a 'triumph,' that is, the violating and deriding of an enemy finally subdued;" as "a compromise with a traditional vendetta;" as "a declaration of war." In popular minds punishment is supposed to create "remorse" or "pangs of conscience." He strongly opposes this use of punishment. On the contrary, All conscientious observers agree that "punishment hardens and freezes; it concentrates; it sharpens the sense of alienation; it strengthens resistance." Moreover, as Nietzsche brilliantly observed, those who are victims of the punitive

authority are prevented from regarding their own deeds as intrinsically evil when they see that “the very same actions performed in the service of justice with a perfectly clear conscience and general approbation: spying, setting traps, outsmarting, bribing, the whole tricky, cunning system which chiefs of police, prosecutors, and informers have developed among themselves; not to mention the cold-blooded legal practices of despoiling, insulting, torturing, and murdering the victims.” In the final analysis Nietzsche postulates that man can be *tamed* by punishment, but not *improved*.

As to the origin of “bad conscience” Nietzsche suggests the transformation in human psyche when he developed a “polity.” With time and due to this transformation man became a sociable and pacific creature. Nietzsche emphasizes that this transformation was so profound and pregnant with possibility that it required “a divine audience”- whether it be called Zeus or Chance – to justify it. Man, therefore, invented divinity. Here Nietzsche brilliantly anticipates modern psychological and anthropological studies which demonstrate that one source of religion is the natural moral faculty of man. This transformation was not a gradual or voluntary process; it was an act of violence by which a race of conquerors organized for war organized others and fiercely dominated them. Then old instincts adapted to wilderness, war, and free roaming were not allowed free play and turned inward, becoming internalized. With it also punishment was developed as a means of protection of the “polity” against ancient instincts of freedom. Man turned against himself those tendencies to “hostility, cruelty, the delight in persecution, raids, excitement, and destruction.” This led to the invention of “bad conscience” which Nietzsche describes as “a disastrous malady,” “man’s sickness of himself,” and “the declaration of war against old instincts.” And he says “In its earliest phase a bad conscience is nothing other than the instinct of freedom forced to become latent, driven underground, and forced to vent its energy upon itself.” This phenomenon of formation of the “bad conscience,” though ugly and painful, created “beauty,” “selflessness, self-denial, self-sacrifice.” “A bad conscience, the desire for self-motivation, is the wellspring of all altruistic values.”

The relationship between debtor and creditor was projected into another context, namely into the relationship between living and the forebears. This obligation felt toward the forebears seems to be a juridical one instead of an emotional one which is rather a new acquisition. Early societies felt that they could survive only because of the sacrifices of the earlier generations, so they had to repay the debt by burnt offerings, rituals, shrines, and obedience to them. But the doubt about the repayment grew with the success of the tribe leading eventually to the necessity of a grand act of repayment (redemption) in the sacrifice of the first-born or other form of human blood. Ancestors slowly became so powerful that they were turned into divinities – “all gods have arisen out of fear.” And this is the second

source of religion anticipated by Nietzsche. This sense of indebtedness to gods and desire to make final restitution grew through the centuries with an evolution of the concepts about the deity. And when combined with despotism it led to a form of monotheism. It ended up in Christianity with a paradoxical and ghastly sacrifice – “god’s sacrifice of himself for humanity;” “the creditor offers himself as a sacrifice for his debtor out of sheer love (can you believe it?), out of love for his debtor ...” The invention of religion serves to exacerbate man’s self-torment, the projection of his denials of self as embodiment, as true reality, as god, as transcendence, endless guilt and punishment. And Nietzsche calls it “sickness, the most terrible sickness that has wasted man thus far.” And he contrasts this image of deity with the image of Greek divinities. Homeric Zeus spoke thus of humans: “How strange that the mortals complain so loudly of us gods! They claim that we are responsible for all their evils. But they are the ones who create their own misery, by their folly, even in the teeth of fate.” To explain the foolishness of one of their members, Greeks would explain: “Well, he must have been deluded by a god.” It resonates like Dawkins’s “Religion is the source of all evil.” Nowadays there is a steady decline in the belief in a Christian god in the western world – does it mean that the growth of atheism will lead to a decline in man’s guilt consciousness? - asks Nietzsche. Perhaps breaking of an altar requires raising another one.

### **The Third Essay: “*What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?*”**

The third essay in the book, the longest one, is the most interesting of the three and attempts to dispel the myth of asceticism. Nietzsche’s analysis also has far fetched implication for the modern world, not only for his time, but especially for our own. It can be divided into several sections: the ascetic ideal in art; the philosopher’s ascetic ideal; the priest and his ascetic ideal; the human condition and the function of the ascetic priests; the mechanisms of alleviating depression and the corruption of the mental health; and finally what does the ascetic ideal signify?

It may be instructive to begin this essay by reporting the end of the book in which Nietzsche summarizes the rise and disappearance of the ascetic ideal. The whole concept is intricately linked with the notion of the will as the driving motor of human activity, intellectual and practical. Man began his existence as an aimless animal. He suffered because he could not answer questions about his existence, how to justify, explain, affirm himself. He invented the ascetic ideal to give meaning to his existence, the best he could invent. New suffering arose through new interpretations and the notion of guilt. Yet he was able now to will something ...

Nietzsche begins this essay with a short introduction trying to review the various meanings of the word for different people: for women – an

angelic look of a pretty “animal;” for men who are physiologically maladjusted – an attempt to see themselves as too good for this world; for priests – the main instrument of their power; for saints – an excuse to hibernate or repose in nothingness; for scholars and philosophers – a condition favorable for intellectual distinction.

This ideal which means so many different things to different people Nietzsche explains in general terms as a *psychological fear of the void*. One can conclude from this that Nietzsche assumes that our will, which is evidently a major element of our consciousness, requires a purpose or aim. We fill it with a variety of desires or aims. Nietzsche shows here that he is an acute observer and a good psychologist. Indeed, humans need a certain motivation for carrying on their everyday lives.

### **The Ascetic Ideal in Art**

Next Nietzsche proceeds with a few remarks concerning why Wagner (1813-1883) in his later years paid homage to chastity. For in his earlier years (in 1867) he wrote a piece of wedding music inspired by Martin Luther’s marriage entitled *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*). Nietzsche was part of Wagner’s inner circle during the early 1870s, and his first published work *The Birth of Tragedy* proposed Wagner’s music as the Dionysian rebirth of European culture in opposition to Apollonian rationalist decadence. He broke with Wagner following the first Bayreuth Festival (1876). He believed that Wagner preached conversion to Christian medieval pieties and surrender to the new demagogic German Reich. The views of Wagner on religion are well described by his son in law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), who stated that Wagner, even during the years 1848-1852, in which he was hostile to Christianity, would talk about religion as the foundation of “human dignity” or the “source of all art.” The churches, however, and the formulation of the revelation in dogmas, though in general are treated by Wagner with great respect, seem to be alien to him in such a way that by reading his writings one is not able to guess to which Christian confession he belongs, and to which formal Christian doctrine he subscribes.<sup>1</sup>

Though Nietzsche realizes that there need be no conflict between the sexual urge and chastity, even a balance between these two can provide an

---

<sup>1</sup> Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Richard Wagner*, (Library Reprints, 2001). Houston Stewart Chamberlain was a British-born naturalized German natural scientist, and author of popular scientific and political philosophy books on Richard Wagner, Immanuel Kant, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe and a proponent of a nationalist and pan-Germanic antisemitism. His book, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899), became one of the references for Teutonic supremacy and pan-Germanic movement of the early 20th century.

enticement for life. The other side of the coin is that those who fail in their sensuality may turn around and begin to worship chastity. This episode leads to another question: What did Parsifal mean to Wagner? Parsifal was a character of his last opera written under the same title Wagner in 1877. Wagner, as usual, wrote his own librettos for his operas. *Parsifal* is an opera based on a thirteenth century epic poem by Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220), *Parzival*, the Arthurian knight (Percival) and his quest for the Holy Grail. The Parsifal of the story was in the end converted to Catholicism. Was this end an expression of Wagner's turnabout and a conversion to medievalism from the follower of Feuerbach (1804-1872)<sup>2</sup> who advocated "healthy sensuality.?"

Analyzing Wagner's change, Nietzsche speculates about the effect Arthur Schopenhauer<sup>3</sup> exerted on him and his notion on the role of music.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach was a German philosopher, anthropologist, and critic of religion who influenced Marx and Engels.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), was a German philosopher who developed his philosophy as a reaction against the post-Kantian metaphysics of his contemporaries and is indebted to Kant and Spinoza as well as to oriental philosophy especially Buddhism and Hinduism. His main work is *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*). Schopenhauer's starting point was Kant's division of the universe into the phenomenal and noumenal. Some commentators suggest that Schopenhauer claimed that the noumenon was the same as that in us which we call will. The will was the inner content and driving force of the world. This is parallel to *purushartha* or goals of life in the Hindu and Buddhist thought. He maintained that philosophy and logic cannot alleviate the fundamental problems of life produced by desire; more effective are art, certain charitable practices such as "loving kindness," and certain forms of religious discipline. Since humans live in the realm of desires, they are tormented by them – point similar to the Hindu tradition. The other important aspects of Schopenhauer's metaphysics is the role of aesthetics. The aesthetic viewpoint is for him more objective than scientific because it separates in the form of art the intellect from the will. Art is a spontaneous act not linked either to the body or to the will. Intellect allows humans to suffer because it brings suffering into a more vivid consciousness. Whereas aesthetic contemplation objectifies the will. But it cannot be completely satisfied, therefore making existence futile and this want of satisfaction he calls happiness. So Schopenhauer is basically characterized as a pessimist and contrasted with the rest of his contemporaries such as Goethe, Hegel or Schelling. Art for him was a spontaneous pre-determined idea in the artist's mind. Thus it is above science and nature, beyond the realm of reason. Moreover, philosophy is not necessarily a pursuit of wisdom but rather, it is a means for interpreting experience of one's own life. This powerful drive to reproduce caused suffering and pain in the world and art provided for Schopenhauer one way to escape them. Art provided also a means to meditate on the unity of human nature. The highest place in art he gave to tragedy and music. Music, especially, is a medium able to represent the universal.

Wagner changed his view of music as a means to see music as a sovereign manifestation of one's being; the musician now became now an oracle, more like a priest and consequently a "mouth-piece" of God, thus appropriating the ideals of asceticism.

Next Nietzsche approaches Kant (1724-1804) and his view of art. He complains that Kant, like all other philosophers, approached art from the side of the spectator and not from the side of the artist. Hence beauty becomes that which provides us with "a disinterested pleasure." And he contrasts this definition with that of Stendhal (1783-1842) who postulated beauty as "a promise of happiness." For Stendhal the moment of aesthetic contemplation is a moment of excitement of the will, of "interest." Nietzsche makes fun of the estheticians who, in support of Kant's view, claim that we may view even nudes disinterestedly. Schopenhauer according to him was much closer to the art when he claimed that aesthetic contemplation counteracts sexual interest. It delivers us from the "urgency of the will" and it acts as "a sedative of the will." In the final analysis both these attitudes, that of Stendhal and Schopenhauer, derive from the interested personal motive. Nietzsche's own view is that "the aesthetic condition does not suspend sensuality, as Schopenhauer believed, but merely transmutes it in such a way that it is no longer experienced as a sexual incentive."

### **The Philosopher's Ascetic Ideal**

Returning to the original question "What does it mean when a philosopher pays homage to the ascetic ideal?" Nietzsche gives a first answer: the philosopher "craves release from torture." He proceeds to muse over this term in a somewhat convoluted way. He discusses Schopenhauer as an example of philosophers who are characterized by a special resentment against sensuality. Schopenhauer treated sexuality as a personal enemy on an equal basis with his intellectual enemies and would have become a pessimist without them. Philosophers, on the positive side, have a prejudice in favor of the ascetic ideal. What is the meaning of these two dispositions? It is related to the natural instinct to strive for the optimum conditions for releasing one's powers. And Nietzsche emphasizes that this is not the path to happiness, but to power. On the contrary, it leads in most cases to unhappiness. The philosopher, according to Nietzsche, abhors marriage and this can be exemplified by such figures as Heraclitus, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Schopenhauer. An exception was Socrates; Buddha left his house in search of freedom: "Close and oppressive is life in a house, a place of impurity; to leave the house is freedom." It becomes clear that the ascetic ideal for the philosopher is a bridge to independence, it allows him the

---

exercise of his intelligence, but at the same time it affirms his existence as in saying: "*pereat mundus, fiat philosophia, fiat philosophus, fiam!*"

Thus the philosophers are prejudiced against the value of the ascetic ideal which encompasses these three elements to some degree: poverty, humility, and chastity. They are not "virtues," but conditions for their optimum existence. Philosophers withdraw from busy everyday life, from noise, adulation, accolades. They need peace above all. Their motto is: "We are owned by the things we own." They hate disturbance, they use big words sparingly, even the word "truth" As to "chastity," the philosopher's immortality comes through other means and really has nothing to do with chastity understood in the sense of ascetic scruple, hatred of the flesh, but is the mandate of his dominant instinct. In contrast, the pseudo-intellectuals seek "fame, princes and women."

This specific asceticism, the lofty continence, was always treated preferentially by philosophers. Moreover, says Nietzsche, philosophy took its first steps with the help of this ideal which supports the virtues of the philosopher: "bent toward skepticism, toward negation, toward suspension of judgment, toward analysis, toward neutrality and objectivity." These tendencies were "forbidden ground" for accepted ethics, even *reason* which was characterized by Luther as "Madame Sophistry, the clever whore." And he goes further explaining that all good things which constitute pride in man look like impiety and *hubris* and things contrary to them "had conscience on their side and God for their guardian." *Hubris* is our attitude toward nature in which Nietzsche sees also bad aspects saying that we violate it with the help of machines and "heedless ingenuity of technicians and engineers" *Hubris* is our attitude toward God whom we characterize as "some putative spider weaving purposes and ethics behind the web of causation," our attitude toward ourselves when we analyze our "souls" and no longer care for "salvation." These are good things which at one time were considered evil. Among other things Nietzsche lists marriage which for long time was "looked upon as an infraction of the right of the community," an expression of "the gentle, benevolent, compassionate feelings," a submission to the law. The progress mankind made had many martyrs. In his book *Daybreak* Nietzsche wrote: "Nothing was ever bought more dearly than the small portion of human reason and freedom that is now our pride. And it is that pride which make it almost impossible for us today to imagine the vast tracts of ritual ethics which, as the truly determining history, precede our world history; those times when suffering, cruelty, dissimulation, vengeance, irrationality were all seen as virtues; well being, intellectual curiosity, peace, and compassion as danger; to be pitied and to labor as disgrace; madness something divine, and change as immoral and a herald of disaster."

From the historical perspective a philosopher had to assert himself as an accepted type of sage and usually as a priest, soothsayer, or similar figure.

And he had to do this under the guise of the ascetic ideal. As a model of such development for the most ancient and most modern philosopher he quotes the case of the King Vishvamitra,<sup>4</sup> hence derives the austere attitude of philosophers which persists until today. The question which Nietzsche now poses is whether the things changed enough so that there is enough *freedom of the will* to make philosophy possible?

### **The Priest and His Ascetic Ideal**

After discussion of the role of the ascetic ideal for a philosopher and its origin as a priest or similar figure, Nietzsche is ready to handle the problem of the ascetic priest. The priest derives his asceticism from his ideal, his faith, his determination, his power and, his interest. He stands or falls with this ideal, so there is no surprise that he will defend it to the bitter end against those who attempt to oppose it.

The important point is what value the ascetic priest places on existence. He views life as a bridge to transcendence, and that we must retrace in this life our steps to the point at which we entered, and he insists that we conduct our lives according to his ideal. What is appalling is that this is the longest and the broadest tradition. An observer from an outer planet could be persuaded that we are a race of proud repulsive creatures unable to rid-ourselves of self-loathing, hatred of the earth and of all living things, who inflict as much pain as possible on ourselves, solely out of pleasure in giving pain – perhaps the only kind of pleasure we know.” The priest does not propagate himself by biological means, he looks malevolently on all biological growth, beauty and joy, and finds delight in everything that is misshapen, in pain, disastrous, ugly. He finds joy in gratuitous sacrifice and self-castigation. He has an insatiable power-drive to dominate life itself. When he begins to philosophize he will declare an error where normal life will consider truth most authoritatively. Just like the Indian Vedas<sup>5</sup> he will

---

<sup>4</sup> The King Vishvamitra is a character in many old Indian Sanskrit epics. The most recent one is *Srimad Valmiki Ramayama* considered from about the second century B.C.E. This *Ramayana* is arranged into six books. The first book Bala Kanda (*Book of Youth*) tells the legend of the King Vishvamitra who was born a Kshatriya (belonging to the warrior caste), but by intense austerities he raised himself to the Brahmin caste, and became one of the seven great Rishis (sages). In Nietzsche’s time the Western world was fascinated by the recently “discovered” wealth of Eastern literature and wisdom.

<sup>5</sup> The name *Vedas* refers to the four Sanscrit texts which constitute the basis of an extensive system of sacred scriptures of Hinduism. The word *veda* in Sanscrit literally means “know.” These *vedic* texts were developed within the so-called *vedic* culture which is based on the differentiation of people into castes (*varna* = color) and the stages of life (*asramas*). Virender Kumar Arya and Malcolm Day, *The Book of the Vedas: Timeless Wisdom from Indian Tradition*, (Fair Winds Press, 2003).



consider the physical objects, their multiplicity, an illusion and deny their reality. He reaches his triumph when reason itself declares that that is a realm of truth not accessible to it. We find traces of it in the Kantian concept of the “noumenal” character of things, that is that aspect of things we can never comprehend. Nietzsche urges philosophers to be on guard against such hallowed myths of “pure reason,” “absolute knowledge,” or “absolute intelligence” for they presuppose that the human “eye” cannot have active and interpretative power. Moreover, he insists that our “seeing” is perspective, that we should allow more emotions and will to be expressed in order to be more objective. In such an attitude Nietzsche again expresses his naturalistic epistemological stance.

Next Nietzsche proceeds to explain how the ascetic ideal arose. **Its source is the protective instinct of life, in defense of itself.** Thus the situation is contrary to what the worshipers of asceticism believe it to be. The ubiquitous existence of asceticism confirms the persistent morbidity of civilized man and his persistent struggle against death. The ascetic priest becomes an incarnation of this wish to be different, but at the same time he is the instrument of bettering the human condition. He is able to maintain in life his flock of self-tormentors, affirming life. And this is so because man becomes most anxious to live when he wounds himself most. Though the human race is the most inventive and the most daring and defiant among the creatures, it is the most unsatisfied and unrealized; certainly humans are the most precarious and the sickest of all animals.

### **The Human Condition and the Function of Ascetic Priests**

Next Nietzsche analyzes the human condition from his perspective of a strong man. Such a strong man is an ideal man for Nietzsche, and the weak ones are those who visit disaster upon themselves. The real danger for humanity comes from loathing and pitying man. Those who are failures and victims, poison life and the social structure; they complain “If only I could be someone else.” “How could I get rid of myself?” Here is the vindictiveness, conspiracy of the sufferers against the successful one. They parade their innocence; with a pharisaic gesture they simulate noble indignation. As an example Nietzsche cites Eugen Dühring<sup>6</sup> and his anti-Semitism. Their aim is

---

William Dwight Whitney, *The Translation of the Veda*, (1868). *Hymns from the Rig-Veda*, translated by Jean Lee Mee, (Jain Publishing Co., 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Karl Dühring (1833-1921), German philosopher and economist who was a strong critic of Marxism. His major works are: *Kapital und Arbeit* (1865); *Der Wert des Lebens* (1865); *Natürliche Dialektik* (1865); *Kritische Geschichte der Philosophie* (1869); *Kritische Geschichte der allgemeinen Principien der Mechanik* (1872), *Kursus der National und Sozialökonomie* (1873); *Kursus der Philosophie* (1875), *Wirklichkeitsphilosophie; Logik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (1878); and *Der*

to implant their own misery, to make the happy ones acknowledge happiness as a disgrace and doubt their happiness by saying “There is too much misery in the world!” Clearly, Nietzsche despises such people and claims that they mime only the virtues such as justice, love, wisdom, superiority. But at the same time he is asking “how [the healthy and strong] should be able to do what they alone can do, and simultaneously act the part of physicians, comforters, saviors of the sick?”

Nietzsche advises us first of all to stay away from loathing and pitying man, and that the ones who should be the “physicians” of the sick should be the sick themselves, that is, the ascetic priests. For if the priest has dominion over the sick, he is sick himself and understands them, yet he must be strong enough and master over himself with intact will to power, to be their overlord, disciplinarian, tyrant, god. He must defend them against the

---

*Ersatz der Religion durch Vollkommeneres* (1883). His philosophy was a naturalistic philosophy of reality. He repudiates Kant’s separation of phenomenon from noumenon, and affirms that our intellect is capable of grasping the whole reality. This is due to the fact that the universe contains only one reality, i.e. matter. But matter is to be understood with a deeper sense as the substratum of all conscious and physical existence. Thus the laws of being are identified with the laws of thought. His system of thought has a teleological aspect, namely, he considers as the end of nature the production of a race of conscious beings. He explains the enigma of pain claiming that it exists to throw pleasure into conscious relief. In ethics Dühring follows Auguste Comte (1797-1857) in making sympathy the foundation of morality. Comte coined the word “altruism” to refer to what he believed to be a moral obligation of individuals to serve others and place their interests above one’s own. He opposed the idea of individual rights, maintaining that they were not consistent with this supposed ethical obligation. In political philosophy Dühring teaches an ethical communism, and attacks the Darwinian principle of struggle for existence. In economics he advocates, just as American writer H. Carey, an ultimate harmony of interests of the capitalist and laborer. He was a German patriot but denounced Jews, Greeks, and the cosmopolitan Goethe. He denounced theistic religion and substitutes for it a doctrine similar to that of Auguste Comte and Feuerbach. Comte attempted to found a new religion which would be in harmony with the fundamental principles of positivism. As his philosophy denies the existence of any divinity or spirit, he admits only humanity as the object of the new cult. He published in 1848 *Discourse on the Totality of Positivism* in which he claimed that the new religion was a necessary addition to his philosophy. In the next year he published an important work, *The Positivistic Calendar, the Systematic Cult of Humanity or the General System of Public Commemoration*. In this work he proposed a cult of adoration of humanity for itself represented by the great men of all epochs, twelve of whom he considered deserving to represent the twelve months of the year, others the weeks, still others would preside over the days of the week. In 1852 he published *Positivistic Catechism* or a summary exposition of his universal religion. He even practiced this religion and considered himself a pontiff.

healthy, and also against their envy of the healthy. The priest is a new species of animal which conducts a war of cunning using his calculated superiority. But before he starts curing he must first create his patients. He carries balms too, but as he alleviates pain, he pours poison into the wounds of his patients. The priest thus accomplishes two things, he defends his flock against themselves and all the troubles that arise among them, and, at the same time, causes accumulation of resentment and aggression and redirects it against a new object. According to Nietzsche this release of aggression alleviates the pain through emotional excitation. This is a physiological mechanism by which a strong, violent emotion dulls the pain. But it is consciously expressed by the type of reasoning; "Somebody must be responsible for my discomfort." "I suffer, it must be somebody's fault." And the ascetic priest says to his flock: "You are quite right, my sheep, somebody must be at fault, but that somebody is yourself."

According to Nietzsche these healing instincts are through the agency of the priests dominated by such concepts as *sin*, *perdition*, *damnation*. Their goal is to render the sick harmless and to make the incurable to destroy themselves, and to introvert the resentment of the less severely inflicted. Their goal is not the rehabilitation of the personality but to create a chasm between the sick, that is between the church, and the healthy. Nietzsche emphasizes that sinfulness is not a basic human condition, but the ethico-religious interpretation of physiological distemper. If a person feels "sinful" or "guilty" it does not mean that this person is so. Similarly if a person feels healthy, it does not mean that he is so. As an example Nietzsche cites the witch trials. In those times the judges and the "witches" themselves had no doubt about their guilt. Yet there was no guilt! For, Nietzsche states, psychological pain is not a fact but a causal interpretation of a set of facts. If one cannot get rid of a psychological pain, the fault lies in his physiology and not in his psyche.

### **Mechanisms of Alleviating Depression and Corruption of Mental Health**

So the priest is not really a physician though he likes to see himself as a savior. He only alleviates the discomfort of the sufferer, at least temporarily. But the priest and Christianity have been an inexhaustible source of a variety of nostrums, restoratives, palliatives, narcotics. Nietzsche observes quite acutely that large masses of humans periodically suffer from some physiological anxiety which is not understood and then religion steps in and provides psychological and moral remedies. He quotes a variety of reasons for this anxiety: crossing the barriers between classes and races which could be interpreted in today's terminology as social and racial conflicts, senescence of population, faulty diet, alcoholism, and various diseases.

People were combating this anxiety in a variety of ways. One of them was the philosopher's approach which is too abstruse and too remote from practical life to have any effect. The philosopher tries to prove that pain is an error and once recognized as such should disappear. However, this does not happen. Among other means used, the first is the reduction of vital energy which involves "no willing, no wishing," "no love, no hate, equanimity, no retaliation, no acquisition of riches, no work, mendicancy, and preferably, no woman." This is the situation described in psychological and moral terms as self-abrogation, sanctification. In physiological terms Nietzsche describes it as hypnosis or hibernation, starving one's body and emotions. Scornfully the adepts of this method are called by Nietzsche "sportsmen of sanctity" who undoubtedly were successful in combating their physiological depression. Yet they cannot be considered mad as it was suggested by freethinkers, though these methods may lead to much mental disorder such as mystical and ethereal experiences (Hesychasts on Mount Athos,<sup>7</sup> visual and auditory hallucinations, the voluptuous inundation of ecstasies of St. Teresa). The explanation of these phenomena given by them is extravagantly false. Redemption is given as the highest mystery in all cases, expressed as a "deliverance from illusions," as a state between "good and evil" (Buddhist and Vedic expression). All three religions admit openly that such a state cannot be achieved by moral improvement, only through the deep sleep can the souls be united with the Supreme Being: "In profound sleep the soul is lifted out of the body, enters the highest sphere of light, and thus puts on its true identity. It becomes the Supreme Spirit, who walks about, dallies, plays and muses himself, whether with women, or chariots, or friends. The soul no longer thinks of its appendage, the body, to which the *prāna* (the breath of life) is harnessed like a draught animal to a cart." The same approach, says Nietzsche, we find even in the cool Epicurus. In all pessimistic religions this "nothingness" is called God.

Other means, much more common, for combating depression, is mechanical activity labeled as "the blessing of labor." Relief here is accomplished by turning attention away from suffering. All that the priest has to do in dealing with the lower classes, or slaves and prisoners, or women who are both, is to change the name – dissatisfaction is changed into blessing. Still another means is ministering the curative pleasures in the form of "giving pleasure" e.g., charity, comfort, praise, friendly advice. In

---

<sup>7</sup> Hesychasts (from Greek *hesychastes* = quietist) were Greek and Eastern Orthodox hermits who claimed that it is possible by a system of asceticism, withdrawal from the world, submission to a master, prayer, and perfect repose of body and will, to see a mystic light, which is the *uncreated light* of God. The contemplation of this light is the highest end of man on earth and through this a man is intimately united with God. This light is the same as appeared at Christ's transfiguration.

prescribing love, such as loving one's neighbor, the priest prescribes excitation of the strongest urge, that is, the "will to power." This is the "minimum superiority" which is the best help if it is well administered. Primitive Christian societies were dominated by the "will to mutual aid." This movement developed later the "will to power" and organizations, the *masses*. The will to power was *promoted* by the priest, and it is, according to Nietzsche, an expression of instinctive longing and a desire to get rid of a feeling of weakness. For the weak find consolation in aggregation, whereas for the strong it is natural to disaggregate. If they join the group it is done for some aggressive action or gratification of the will to power. History demonstrated that every oligarchy concealed a desire to tyranny by the individuals.

These measures are rather harmless remedies. Now Nietzsche proposes to discuss more deleterious "drugs" which are characterized by "extravagance of feeling" rampant in modern society. By this Nietzsche means the moralistic hypocrisy of educated modern men. They are not able to distinguish between the true and false in themselves. "The 'good' of today are, to a man, determined to treat every issue in a spirit of profound hypocrisy – innocent, straightforward, true-blue hypocrisy." He gives a few examples such as Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, Schopenhauer, and the biographer of Beethoven. The simplistic but innocuous account of the Reformation by a Catholic priest, Cornelius Jansenius the Elder, aroused an outcry in Protestant Germany.<sup>8</sup> What if a psychologist decided to give a true account of Luther with intrepidity and not in the spirit of connivance?

Next Nietzsche complains that psychologists are too infected by this moralistic taste, though they feel contempt for such a taste, that prevents them to be honest with themselves. They should, according to Nietzsche, say "let us distrust our first reactions, they are invariably much too favorable." The main issue is the use of the ascetic ideal as a safety valve for emotions which pile up and need to be released. The ascetic priest does it, at least temporarily, by all these techniques discussed earlier – "rage, fear, lust, vengeance, hope, triumph, despair, cruelty" – and under some religious justification. These remedies, though unacceptable today, did not cure but only provided a temporary relief, and often produced a mental disturbance.

---

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Jansenius Gandaviensis or Cornelius Jansen the Elder (1510-1576), bishop of Ghent, must be differentiated from his homonym, Cornelius Jansenius Yprensis, bishop of Ypres (1585-1638) who initiated the movement of Jansenism. Cornelius Jansenius Gandaviensis was one of the most distinguished exegetes of the sixteenth century, and his work "*Concordia Evangelica*" was epoch-making in the history of the Catholic exegesis. He insisted on the literal interpretation of the scripture against the mystical and emphasized the importance of the text in the original languages.

They have been employed in good faith, and often the priest himself was shuttered by the misery he had to inflict. Now it becomes clear why the priest had to use the concept of guilt to achieve his goal. Man, searching for the cause of his anxiety, was given an answer by the priest – to look into himself, into his past and to view his suffering as a penance, exaggerated by his “sadistic conscience.” From now on he will be trapped in the circle of “sin” and “sinfulness,” in a deliberate misinterpretation of suffering as guilt, terror and punishment, crying for redemption. Nietzsche writes: “No doubt such a system of procedures, once instituted, made short work of ancient depression and tedium. Life again became a highly interesting business. Initiated into these mysteries, the sinner became wide-awake, eternally wide-awake, aglow yet burned out, exhausted yet far from weary. The ascetic priest, that grand old magician and warrior against depression, had conquered at last; his kingdom had come. People no longer complained of pain but were insatiable for it.”

Now Nietzsche asks the question: What was the “benefit” of all of this “medication”? The “benefit” means here only to “make worse”- it made depressed people sicker. And he reviews briefly results of this treatment in collective epileptic epidemics, the change of temperament in entire cities like Geneva and Basel, witch craze, mass somnambulism, and a mass delirious cry for death. He calls this religious neurosis a form of evil! “This ascetic ideal, with its sublime moral cult, with its brilliant and irresponsible use of emotions for holy purposes, has etched itself on the memory of mankind terribly and unforgettably. I can think of no development that has had a more pernicious effect upon the health of the race, and especially the European race, than this. It may be called, without exaggeration, the supreme disaster in the history of European man’s health.”<sup>9</sup> The present day sorry condition of some parts of our modern world and some sections of our society show how true are these words of Nietzsche and how perspicacious was his psychological analysis.

Next Nietzsche expresses his contempt for the New Testament – “this most esteemed, overesteemed, document” with which the priest has corrupted man’s esthetic taste. But he has the highest respect for the book of the Old Testament in which he finds real passion of a people who tried to attract the attention of the “Great Demiurge.” Though he does not accept the veracity of its content. He has no good word about Martin Luther, “the most eloquent and presumptuous of German peasants,” who produced “turbulence” against the church etiquette. Nietzsche sarcastically speaks of

---

<sup>9</sup> In my book *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553): The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*, (Lewiston, Lampeter, Oxford: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), I reviewed the entire history of Christianity and the results if its domination over the fifteen centuries.

Luther as the one who wanted to speak directly and without mediation of the hierarchy with God, though Nietzsche does not have any respect for the Pope, either.

### **What Does the Ascetic Ideal Signify? Its Implications for Atheism**

It is the last topic concerning the ascetic ideal which Nietzsche wants to discuss. He is concerned with the meaning of this power and why people yielded to it and did not resist. According to Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is an expression of the will, its goal is universal, and it orients epochs, nations, and individuals, has absolute superiority and claims that it gives meaning and value to human existence. It has no antithesis and the modern scholarship that “gets along without God, transcendence and restrictive virtues” is not the opposite but the noblest and latest form of this ideal. There are many scholars who labor in many fields, especially in the field of science and the humanities, and proclaim that everyone should be content with what one is doing. But it does not prove that learning today has an ideal, a passionate belief. On the contrary, says Nietzsche, learning today is “a hiding place for all manner of maladjustment, lukewarmness, self-depreciation, guilty conscience” and the scholars are sufferers “unwilling to admit their suffering... mortally afraid of regaining consciousness.”

Now Nietzsche expands further his discussion of the scholars, philosophers, and scientists, all these atheists, skeptics, and agnostics, asking whether they are really free from the ascetic ideal? And his answer is that it is they, precisely, who today represent this ascetic ideal because they believe in truth. They are tied to their belief in truth and do not have the true freedom and detachment epitomized for Nietzsche by the eastern order of the Society of Assassins<sup>10</sup> whose slogan for the highest ranks was “Nothing is true; everything is permitted.” For real freedom means disposing of the notion of truth. The absolute “will to truth” which is so typical of those scholars is an unconscious belief in the ascetic ideal in its most radical form. Even science is not free of assumptions and a philosophy is always needed to give science a direction. “The faith on which our belief in science rests is still a metaphysical faith.” In the past and even today, according to Nietzsche, those who are atheists and anti-metaphysicians look up to the Christian faith for truth that was divine. But if the divine turns out to be an error and lies, and

---

<sup>10</sup> The Assassins was a shadowy group located in remote stateless areas, practicing a radical brand of Islam. They promised their followers a reward in the hereafter if they died in battle. They fought fiercely the invading Christian crusaders in the Middle Ages. There are obvious parallels with the modern groups.

God the longest lie, our inquiry still needs a justification, and the new problem arises of the value of truth.

Where do we find this ideal antithetical to the ascetic ideal? Science, according to Nietzsche, requires normative value outside itself; learning and inquiry are not antagonistic to the ascetic ideal, rather, it is their driving force, they oppose its temporary dogmatism; art is more opposed to an ascetic ideal than science, as epitomized by a contrast between Homer and Plato. Throughout history inquiry was only able to “raze the wall of fortifications” around the ascetic ideal, that is to explain things such as “theological astronomy,” but it did not abolish the need for a transcendental solution to questions concerning life. The destruction of man’s special status in the hierarchy of beings by scientific discovery and his self-contempt constitute his serious claim to respect and did nothing to the ascetic ideal. Kant, though he destroyed the conceptual apparatus of dogmatic theology, opened the way for transcendentalists. Similarly for agnostics the question mark became a new god. Nietzsche does not have good words for historians either. He divides them into two groups – those who do not prove anything, who do not want to be judges, only describe (Tolstoy, Dühring), and the others who are engaged in the praise of contemplation (Ernest Renan). He is outraged at the anti-Semites who, using the cheapest of the propaganda tricks, a moral attitude, try to stir the lowest elements in the nation. And this is done through spreading “counterfeit ideals,” “fake idealism, fake heroism, and fake eloquence.”

Nietzsche promises to treat more extensively the issue of the significance of the ascetic ideal in another book *The Will to Power: a Study in the Transvaluation of All values*. Here he limits himself to stating that in places where the strict and scrupulous spirit survives, idealism seems to have vanished. Such places are where *atheism* is practiced and where the “will to truth” constitutes an ideal itself in its most sublimated form. Honest atheism is not opposed to asceticism, but is “one of the last evolutionary phases of that idea, one of its natural and logical consequences.” Atheism now prohibits the lie of the monotheistic religion that lasted for two millennia.<sup>11</sup> Similar process happened in India where the identical ideal was converted into Sankhya philosophy and codified by Buddha into a religion.

---

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche seems here to anticipate the modern philosopher of religion, Stanisław Cieniawa, who postulates as the final stage of the process of the evolution of religion the development of an authentic “religion” of the Highest Values. Traditional theistic religions he classifies as “confessions” in opposition to the natural and moralistic lifestance based on reason, science and moral principles. Stanisław Cieniawa, “The Plurality of Confessions and One religion,” in *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, Vol, 11, pp. 13-20, 2003. Stanisław Cieniawa, “Let’s Learn Religion from ... Flowers,” in *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, Vol, 14, pp. 69-78, 2006.



“Christianity as dogma perished by its own ethics, and in the same way Christianity as ethics must perish; we are standing on the threshold of this event.” Christianity will now, according to Nietzsche, draw its own conclusion by which it shall do away with itself. And he ends his book by claiming that “It is by this dawning of self-consciousness of the will to truth that ethics must now perish.” Of course, he does not mean that we will behave unethically, but we may speculate that he postulates an optimistic and utopian vision of the future where the ideal humans will no longer need the restrictive, and normative rules, they will know only “good.”

### **Bibliography**

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Francis Golffing, Anchor Books, New York, 1956.
- Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 1993.
- Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated with an introduction by Lewis White Beck, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1988.
- Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds. How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, HarperCollins, New York, 2006.
- Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 2001.
- Eugen Karl Dühring, *The Value of Existence, A course in Philosophy, (Der Werth des Lebens; eine Denkerbetrachtung im sinne heroischer Lebensauffassung)*, O.R. Reisland, Leipzig, 1922.