**Nietzsche the immoralist**

Nietzsche’s approach to philosophical issues is radically different from almost everyone else in the history of philosophy. What makes him so different? Nietzsche himself was fond of describing his work in a few different ways (though rarely as a philosopher)

**Nietzsche the Philologist**

One of Nietzsche’s favoured titles was “philologist”.

1. You must forgive an old philologist like me who cannot help maliciously putting his finger on bad tricks of interpretation: but this "conformity of nature to law," which you physicists are so proud of, just as if - - exists only because of your interpretation and bad "philology." […]

(Beyond Good and Evil §22)

Classical philology was a popular and respected approach to classics study in 19th century Germany. It emphasised the historical nature of classical languages, faiths, and philosophies, and examined classical texts through attention to historical context (think of the different ways a philosopher and historian would read Plato).

The young Nietzsche’s studies, professional appointment at Basel, and first major publication, all suggest that Nietzsche was right to describe himself in this way. Adoration for the Greeks and fondness for philological methods were not exclusive to the young Nietzsche; they would stay with him for the rest of his life.

1. […] Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words - in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial - out of profundity! […]

(Preface to *the Gay Science*, section 4. Written in 1886)

(For more see:

* Jessica Berry ‘Nietzsche and the Greeks’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*
* Tuska Benes ‘Philology, Language, and the Constitution of Meaning and Human Communities’ in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* (NB this is about philology, not Nietzsche))

**Nietzsche the Genealogist**

Sometimes Nietzsche’s training as a classical historian is deployed in genealogy. Thus, of course, for example, his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*. But his use of genealogy is not exclusive to that work. For example:

1. […] originally man believed, wherever he saw something happen, that a will had to be the cause and that beings with a personal will had to be operating in the background - the concept of mechanics was quite foreign to him. But since man believed for immense periods of time only in persons (and not in substances, forces, things, etc.), the faith in cause and effect has become for him the fundamental faith that he uses everywhere something happens - still today instinctively and as an atavism of the oldest origin. The propositions, 'no effect without a cause', 'every effect again a cause', appear as generalizations of much narrower propositions: 'no effecting without willing'; 'it is possible to have an effect only on willing beings'; 'no suffering of an effect is ever pure and without consequences, but all suffering is an agitation of the will' (towards action, defence, revenge, retribution) - but in the prehistory of humanity the former and latter propositions were identical: the former were not generalizations of the latter, but the latter were elucidations of the former. […]

(The Gay Science, §127)

As historian, genealogist, and philologist, Nietzsche’s approach was to take a critical view of contemporary (late-modern, 19th century European) beliefs and values by treating them in the same way that a classicist would treat beliefs and values in ancient civilisations: by understanding their historical and sociological context, and their emergence from historical origins.

(Reading on Nietzsche and genealogy is on the Faculty reading list. We will return to this in lecture 5)

**Nietzsche the Psychologist**

Nietzsche also often focuses on objects of study of a much smaller scale, that is, the thought and behaviour of individuals.

1. All psychology so far has been stuck in moral prejudices and fears: it has not ventured into the depths. To grasp psychology as morphology and the doctrine of the development of the will to power, which is what I have done - nobody has ever come close to this, not even in thought: […] the psychologist who "makes sacrifices" (they are not the sacrifizio dell’intelletto [sacrifice of the intellect]- to the contrary!) can at least demand in return that psychology again be recognized as queen of the sciences, and that the rest of the sciences exist to serve and prepare for it. Because, from now on, psychology is again the path to the fundamental problems.

(Beyond Good and Evil §23)

Note 3 things about this passage that are common features of Nietzsche’s work:

1. Nietzsche’s ego!
2. Use of the slogan “the will to power” to describe Nietzsche’s preferred form of psychological insight (more of which in week 8)
3. The privileged status Nietzsche accords to this preferable psychology

Compare Kant’s use of the same phrase “queen of the sciences”:

1. [reason] falls into confusion and contradictions, from which it conjectures the presence of latent errors, which, however, it is unable to discover, because the principles it employs, transcending the limits of experience, cannot be tested by that criterion. The arena of these endless contests is called *metaphysics*. Time was, when she was the *queen* of all the sciences; and, if we take the will for the deed, she certainly deserves, so far as regards the high importance of her object-matter, this title of honour.

(Critique of Pure Reason; Avii)

Nietzsche’s psychological approach: ask of a philosophical position or theory not whether it is true or valid, but rather: what kind of person would be attracted to this philosophical position, and why is that position attractive to them?

Here’s a relatively simple example of this: Nietzsche claiming that Kant’s moral philosophy is an expression of a lack of vitality that motivated his hostility to natural virtue:

1. […] 'Virtue', 'duty', 'goodness in itself', goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universally valid - these are fantasies and manifestations of decline, of the final exhaustion of life, of the Konigsberg Chinesianity […] The instinct that is wrong about everything, anti-nature as instinct, German decadence as philosophy - this is Kant! -

(*The Antichrist*, §11)

And a more complicated example:

1. […] And anyone who has ever truly felt how inanely false and sentimental this claim is in a world whose essence is will to power -, they might recall that Schopenhauer, pessimism notwithstanding, actually - played the flute […] every day, after dinner. You can read it in his biography. And just out of curiosity: a pessimist who negates both God and world but stops before morality, - who affirms morality and plays his flute, affirms laede neminem [harm no one] morality: excuse me? is this really – a pessimist?

(Beyond Good and Evil §186)

Sometimes Nietzsche is explicit about the fact that he is less interested in the truth of a theory than in other reasons that theory was first proposed:

1. We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates, the type. […] To acknowledge untruth as a condition of life: this clearly means resisting the usual value feelings in a dangerous manner; and a philosophy that risks such a thing would by that gesture alone place itself beyond good and evil.

(Beyond Good and Evil §4)

One implicit principle in much of Nietzsche’s psychology: of any given theory, ask what kind of person would be attracted to that theory, and *how that theory allows that kind of person to flourish*.

Sometimes, according to Nietzsche, we find that the doctrine in question will not be conducive to flourishing for anyone:

1. […] What horrifies me when I look at this is not the error as an error, not the thousands of years without a 'good will', discipline, decency, courage in spiritual matters that are apparent in its victory: - it is the absence of nature, it is the absolutely horrible state of affairs where antinature itself has been given the highest honour as morality and hangs over humanity as law, as categorical imperative! […]

(Ecce Homo, ‘Why I am a Destiny’, §7)

(For more see: Robert Pippin *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* University of Chicago Press, 2010)

**Nietzsche as Pathologist**

Nietzsche’s psychology thus has a vitalistic, even biologistic tone; that is, it sometimes seems he is more interested in a philosopher’s physiological constitution than the truth of their theory. This is in fact precisely how he sometimes describes the “new philosophy”:

1. Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some finale, a final state of some sort, every predominantly aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, permits the question whether it was not illness that inspired the philosopher. […] I am still waiting for a philosophical physician in the exceptional sense of the term – someone who has set himself the task of pursuing the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity - to summon the courage at last to push my suspicion to its limit and risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but rather something else - let us say health, future, growth, power, life […]

(The Gay Science, preface, §2)

Nietzsche’s self-described philosophical physiology is often crude and vulgar or playful, depending on how charitable one is as a reader of Nietzsche. Consider e.g. how rude he could sometimes be about Socrates:

1. Socrates was descended from the lowest segment of society: Socrates was plebeian. We know, we can still see how ugly he was. But ugliness, an objection in itself, was almost a refutation for the Greeks. Was Socrates Greek at all? Often enough, ugliness is a sign of crossbreeding, of arrested development due to crossbreeding. In other cases it appears as a declining development. Anthropologists specializing in crime tell us that the typical criminal is ugly: monstrum infronte, monstrum in animo [monster in face, monster in soul]. But criminals are decadents. Was Socrates a typical criminal? - At the very least, this is not contradicted by that famous physiological judgment that sounded so offensive to Socrates' friends. A foreign expert in faces who had come to Athens told Socrates to his face that he was a monstrum, - that he was a repository for all the vices and bad appetites. And Socrates simply replied: 'you know me, sir!' –

(Twilight of the Idols, Problem of Socrates, §3)

The extremes of Nietzsche’s “philosophical pathology” are unattractive, but they involve a psychological insight Nietzsche understood better than most: that one’s physical health has a significant role to play in the way we think

**Nietzsche’s Distinctive Approach to Philosophy**

To recap, there are four ways in which Nietzsche was fond of describing his “new philosophy”:

1. As a **philologist**, Nietzsche examines philosophical theories as if they were historical belief systems, examining the historical, sociological, and geographical factors that explain why people hold those theories.
2. As a **genealogist**, Nietzsche applies a similar historical approach, but specifically focusses on the origins from which a given philosophical theory has developed, and what that tells us about the theory itself.
3. As a **psychologist**, Nietzsche responds to a philosopher’s claims not by asking whether those claims are valid or true, but instead by asking what kind of person that philosopher is, and what kind of character would be attracted to the philosophical theory in question.
4. And finally as a **pathologist,** Nietzsche’s psychological approach focuses specifically on the health of the philosopher in question, and examines how a given philosophical theory is driven by either the health or illness of the philosopher.

Each of the four reflects different facets of Nietzsche’s general approach to philosophy: a combination of scepticism about universal claims, and a suspicion that a given theory will tell us more about the prejudices of the theorist than about the object of the theory. Paul Ricoeur called this a “hermeneutics of suspicion”.

(For an interesting consideration of a problem that emerges for Nietzsche’s hermeneutics of suspicion, see Robert Solomon ‘Nietzsche *ad hominem*: Perspectivism, personality and *ressentiment*’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*)

**Nietzsche’s immoralism – the theme for this term**

Nietzsche’s best known application of his hermeneutics of suspicion is his critique of morality. It is in virtue of this critique that Nietzsche described himself as an “immoralist”:

1. I am by far the most terrible human being who has ever existed; this does not mean that I will not be the most charitable. I know the joy of destruction to a degree proportionate to my strength for destruction, - In both cases I obey my Dionysian nature, which does not know how to separate doing no from saying yes. I am the first immoralist: which makes me the destroyer par excellence. –

(Ecce Homo, ‘Why I am a Destiny, §2)

What is the “morality” against which Nietzsche takes so fiercely?

Ethics are codes of right or good living by which a particular society or culture lives. Morality, as Nietzsche understands it, is one such ethic.

Morality favours altruism, compassion, and selflessness, and condemns power, domination, selfishness, and indifference to others’ suffering.

Morality is also distinguished by particular meta-ethical and moral psychological concepts (e.g. responsibility, conscience), and even influences the way we think about philosophy, arts, politics, and science.

The aim of this term’s lectures will be to better understand how Nietzsche applied his method of suspicion to morality, what objections this generated, and how his immoralist critique went beyond obviously moral values to also scrutinise modern historiography, science, and epistemology.

**Next week:** Suffering, redemption, and tragedy

**Main relevant text:** *The Birth of Tragedy*

**Additional Admin**

1. Lecture schedule this term:

Week 1 – Nietzsche the immoralist

Week 2 – Suffering, redemption, and tragedy

Week 3 –Master and slave moralities

Week 4 – Moralism and guilt

Week 5 – Genealogy

Week 6 – Freedom and fate

Week 7 – Will to power

Week 8 – Truth and perspectivism

1. Reading group: *The Gay Science*

Fridays 12-1pm, weeks 2 - 8

Faculty of Philosophy Graduate Common Room

Reading for first session: Book I, sections 1-21 (inclusive)

*Matt Bennett*

*Email* *mpb74@cam.ac.uk*

*Website (including teaching materials): drmattbennett.weebly.com*