

Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*

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Devaluing Life

- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) promises to “philosophize with the hammer.”
- His method in *Twilight of the Idols* is to examine philosophical claims by exposing the psychological conditions of the philosophers who have proposed them.
 - “These wisest sages of all times, one should first take a close look at them!”
- The claim that interests him here is that human life is of little or no value.
 - Socrates: “Living—that means being sick a long time.”
- Nietzsche takes this attitude to be a symptom of a sickness on the part of the philosophers.
- He asks rhetorically whether wisdom (embodied in his own approach) is excited by the scent of rotting meat.
- His task, then, is to discover the sources of the philosophers’ anti-life attitude.

Instinct and Happiness

- Nietzsche analyzes the case of Socrates to uncover the origin of the anti-life attitude.
- He understood Socrates to be symptomatic of an impending decline in Greek civilization.
- Every civilization, including the Greek, is healthy when the happiness of its people is the product of *instinct*.
- The Greek civilization was becoming sick because its instincts were at war with one another, producing a decadent state.
- Socrates recognized this sickness in himself, when he agreed that he contained all bad cravings within him.
- He claimed to have mastered these cravings by using *reason* as a tool of control.
- His formula was: reason = virtue = happiness.

The Futility of Reason

- Later Greek philosophers embraced Socrates's advocacy of reason as a tyrannical force that can be instinct under control.
- In an ascendant civilization, as was the Greek before Socrates, excessive use of reason was considered bad manners.
- Socrates used reason, in the form of dialectical argument, as a weapon against his enemies.
- He was able to humiliate them, but he never succeeded in convincing them.
- In general, reason is able to suppress instincts, but it is not able to eliminate them.
- Nietzsche speculates that Socrates recognized his inability to overcome his "sickness" and willingly embraced death.
- And so reason in general is no cure for a declining civilization.

The Idiosyncracies of the Philosophers

- Philosophers are "idiosyncratic," in that their views are not held by the great mass of people.
- Nietzsche discusses two idiosyncracies of the philosophers:
 - Their hostility to history, and more generally to "becoming,"
 - Their confusion of what comes first with what comes last.
- The first idiosyncrasy is manifest in their view that the senses bear false testimony of becoming, whereas reason reveals the "truth" of "being."
- The second idiosyncrasy gives rise to the concept of a "cause of itself," which is the philosophers' conception of God.
- Nietzsche views both of these idiosyncracies as symptoms of the decadence of the philosophers.

Becoming and Being

- The consensus of the philosophers is that the senses lie by presenting plurality and change.
 - An exception is Heraclitus, who thought that the senses lie by presenting objects as unified and persisting.
- The senses are said to present only "appearances," to which is opposed unchanging "being," or "reality."

- On this view, the role of the body is degraded to the point that it too is regarded as being unreal, “although it has the nerve to behave as if it were real!”
- According to Nietzsche, the body and its senses are extremely revelatory, and what they reveal is the basis of science.
- “Reason,” on the other hand, turns features of the dynamic world revealed by the senses into “conceptual mummies,” sucking the life out of everything it touches.

God

- The God of the philosophers is itself a conceptual mummy, a completely empty concept of “the most real being.”
- This abstraction comes at the end of the process by which “reason” falsifies the presentations of the senses.
- Yet the philosophers think that “the most real being” is the starting point of all reality.
- It is supposed to be the starting point because “the most real being” is said to be “the cause of itself.”
- This inversion occurs because “being” is more highly valued than is “becoming.”
- The philosophers claim that what is less valuable can only come from what is more valuable, so “being” must be the origin of “becoming.”
- Nietzsche claims that society has “paid dearly” for taking seriously “the mental distortions of sickly web-spinners.”

Language and Being

- The inversion of the priority of being over becoming has its roots in language.
 - The “error of being” “has on its side every word, every sentence we speak!”
- The fundamental unit of language is the “subject” (e.g. in Aristotle, where all else is “in” or “said of” a subject).
- This leads to a metaphysics of “things” which “act.”
- The original “subject” is the “I,” which is said to “will.”
- This relation of enduring subject to transitory action is projected onto all of “reality.”
- Once a “real world” of enduring “things” is set up, philosophers discover that we can be certain of it through “reason” in a way we could never be certain through the senses of “becoming.”

The Rise and Fall of the “Real World”

- Nietzsche recounts the development of the relation of “real” to “apparent”
- In Plato, the “real world” is accessible to the wise and virtuous.
- Christianity then claims that the “real world” (the realm of God) is attainable only in another life.
- For Kant, the “real world” is only an ideal which gives us some consolation for our existence in the world of “appearances.”
- As science develops, it is realized that the “real world” no longer has relevance to our lives at all.
- Enlightened modern people reject the “real world” altogether, and with the “apparent world,” since there is no longer any contrast to be made.

Dealing With the Passions

- Human passions, in and of themselves, are stupid and must be dealt with.
- Christianity, on behalf of those who are weak of will, declares the passions to be the enemy, and seeks to eradicate them.
- Thus it turns against sensuality and even life itself.
- The best way to deal with the passions is “spiritualize” them, as when sensuality is turned to love.
- This option requires dealing with the passions intelligently, but Christianity has waged war against the intellect.
- In trying to destroy the passions, Christianity promotes quietude, but Nietzsche holds that we need opposition in order to achieve anything worthwhile.

Naturalistic Morality

- Nietzsche argues in favor of a “healthy morality.”
 - It is exemplified by “ripeness and mastery in the midst of doing, creating, working, willing.”
- A healthy morality must be naturalistic, built upon natural instincts, and not aiming to destroy them.
- Both the anti-naturalistic Christian morality and the kind Nietzsche advocates place some kind of value on life—against it or for it.
- But valuation itself is merely a symptom of the kind of life one is living.
- It is naive and bigoted to say that people *should* be one way or another.
- The naturalistic moralist (the “immoralist” to Christianity) does not fall into this trap, but finds value even in the life of the priest.

Causality

- Morality and religion are based on a confusion of cause with effect.
 - Virtue is the effect, not the cause, of happiness,
 - Vice is the effect, not the cause, of degeneracy.
- The root of the confusion is a mistaken conception of how causality works.
- We take as a model of causality an act of the human will on the basis of a motive.
- But in fact, in the “internal world,” “will” and “motive” simply accompany the production of an act, rather than cause it.
- We invent these imaginary causes in order to “explain” our pleasant and unpleasant feelings in a way that appears to give us some measure of control over them.
- This is the basis of religion, where “virtue” beings about pleasant feelings, and “vice” unpleasant ones.

Free Will

- “Free will” is an invention of theologians who want people to feel responsible for their actions.
- This results in a feeling of guilt, which religious leaders use as an instrument of subjugation.
- The doctrine of free will depends on making will and motive into causal agents, which is an error.
- The healthy morality of the naturalist seeks to purge guilt from the world.
- No one is in fact responsible for what they are, and there is no goal of life imposed on us.
 - “There is nothing that could rule, measure, compare, judge our being.”
- By denying God, the immoralist denies responsibility, and in this way the world is redeemed.

The Original Immoralists

- As has been noted, Nietzsche claimed that the philosophical doctrines of Socrates, Plato, and the later Greek philosophers are symptoms of the decline of their civilization.
- In earlier times, the Greeks exemplified a healthy, naturalistic morality.
- This morality is to be found in the cult of the god Dionysis.

- The sensualism of the Dionysian rites celebrates all of life through its exploration of sexuality.
- Even pain is glorified because it necessarily accompanies childbirth.
- The Dionysian cult was a celebration of life it made all aspects of life holy.
- Nietzsche's immoralism and anti-Christianity stems ultimately from his discovery of this life-affirming morality.