

## Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: 'Why insist on the truth?'

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Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844 into a Protestant family in Saxony, in the north east of Germany, and began his academic career as a philologist (a scholar of classical languages). During his early twenties Nietzsche became a Professor of Philology at the University of Basle, but by the time he wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886 he had left academia and moved to the Swiss mountains in order to concentrate on his philosophy. Nietzsche's enthusiasm for high altitudes, clean air and a decent view was rather fanatical, and in fact his re-location to the Alps illustrates, metaphorically, three of his key philosophical ideas.

First, his aristocratic style of thought, his contempt for mediocrity, and his reverence for the creative, exceptional individual are expressed in the image of a solitary philosopher living in the mountains high above the town, elevated (and somewhat isolated) from the common man. Second, Nietzsche rejects the values of traditional philosophy – namely, truth as opposed to falsehood, and moral goodness as opposed to evil – and replaces them with his preference for strength and good health, as opposed to weakness and sickness. Nietzsche liked anything that makes people physically and spiritually stronger; he hated the stuffy, claustrophobic atmosphere he perceived in the academic establishment, and his writing attempts to create an intellectual climate that, like the invigorating Alpine air, enables individuals to flourish. And thirdly, the panoramic views at the summit of a mountain symbolise a feature of Nietzsche's thought that is often called 'perspectivism'<sup>1</sup>: unlike followers of Plato, Nietzsche insists that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and argues instead that all thinking and perception comes from a particular perspective, and that different perspectives will produce different views of truth. There are *only* these views of truth, or interpretations; there is no objective reality beneath them, no independent standard that they refer to. The task of the philosopher, then, is not to rid himself of perspective – this would not be possible, since to be a person *is* to be a particular perspective, a particular point of view, to be in only one place at once – but to look at things from many different perspectives.

These three aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy will be considered in more detail as I discuss some of the ideas presented in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Before we explore the text further, though, I should add a word of warning about how to approach Nietzsche's rather unusual style of writing. Nietzsche thought that philosophy – or at least, the kind of philosophy he approved of – was more like art than science, and it is important to bear in mind that the way he writes often reflects his philosophical views. For example, he does not attempt to conceal his own perspective by offering a theory that is supposed to be objectively and universally true.

Whereas Socrates argued that knowledge is far superior to opinion, and that our ability to think rationally should control our more emotional reactions, Nietzsche's style of writing is passionate and opinionated - and this is one of the tactics he uses to undermine the philosophical tradition that Socrates influenced so heavily. Instead of constructing logical arguments to support his philosophical views, Nietzsche tends to rely more on colourful language, vivid metaphors, dialogue, myths and humour to win over his readers. This means that when we read Nietzsche we have to pay attention to the images, themes and emotional tones that recur in his writing, in much the same

way as we study a novel or a poem in English Literature. It also means that, if we agree with Nietzsche's view of philosophy, we should look out for these more literary aspects of other philosophical texts in order to see how arguments that appear to be purely rational are often expressed using language that is rich in metaphors and strong feeling.

### *The Value of Truth*

If Nietzsche's contribution to philosophy had to be summed up in a single question, this question would be, *what is the value of truth?* This quite simple and apparently innocent question is, in fact, a devastating blow to the dominant philosophical tradition, which until Nietzsche was united in its pursuit of the truth. Philosophers may have disagreed about how to define truth, how to achieve it, and indeed how attainable this goal is, but no-one had questioned the idea that truth is something good, valuable, worth pursuing and perhaps even worth dying for. Socrates, who became the hero of western philosophy, believed that truth was worth more than life itself: on his deathbed, he quite calmly told his friends that he was happy to die because his earthly, embodied existence was like a prison that barred his way to knowledge of the eternal Ideas or Forms. So when Nietzsche, at the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, raises 'the problem of the value of truth', he is questioning a belief and an attitude that lies right at the heart of philosophy. 'Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance? ...Why insist on the truth?'<sup>2</sup>

These questions have to be understood in the context of Nietzsche's view that European culture was in decline, and heading towards nihilism. 'Nihilism' means believing in nothing, and refusing to recognise value in anything. (As we think about Nietzsche's philosophy, it is worth asking ourselves whether this view applies to the world we live in today.) Although Nietzsche's philosophy is sometimes mistakenly described as 'nihilistic', the opposite is in fact the case, for the purpose of his writing was to halt and to reverse this process of decline - to remove the causes of Europe's spiritual sickness and to create the conditions for recovery and renewal. Nietzsche believes that what he calls 'the will to truth' - that is, the unquestioning faith that truth is the highest value, and the pursuit of truth at all costs - drains the value out of life. This tendency, he argues, is exemplified not only by Socrates and philosophy, but by science and by the morality taught by Jewish and Christian religions. This means that philosophy, science and religion - the three cornerstones of intellectual life - are in fact responsible for the decline of European humanity. When Nietzsche attacks these, he is not just being wilfully destructive, but attempting to restore Europe to spiritual good health and vitality by encouraging people to have a more positive attitude to life, and even to create new values. Instead of using truth as the highest standard of value, Nietzsche argues, individuals need to develop their own powers of judgment and to produce ideas and ethics that will strengthen them and help them to live: 'The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.'<sup>3</sup>

Let us consider an example of this idea.<sup>4</sup> Imagine a person who believes that a loving God created the world and everything in it - including herself. Such a person would think of her own life as a gift from God, and this belief would give her existence value

and meaning. Now suppose that scientists found proof for the theory that all conscious life was created by a 'big bang', an event that has nothing to do with loving purpose or design. This theory may be more *true* than belief in God, but would it be *better*? Might it not be the case that scientific truths make life harder to bear, make people more unhappy, and undermine the value of our existence? As Nietzsche says, the truth may be that nature is 'wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time'<sup>5</sup> - but who would want to live their life according to such a truth? It is because this truth is so harsh and difficult to live with that people invent myths, stories, pictures, and a whole variety of different interpretations, to give meaning and value to existence. The question we have to ask when we choose to accept a particular interpretation is not, *is it true?* , but *will it make me stronger?*

Nietzsche's view that the truth may be undesirable suggests that he is not attempting to abandon the notion of truth altogether. Rather, by questioning the *value* of truth he is undermining its claims to authority over us, and its claims to be absolute. For Nietzsche there is no such thing as *the* truth, objective and independent of ourselves; each person is entitled to their own truth, discoverable only from their particular perspective, but Nietzsche warns against the attempt to impose this truth onto others. He envisages philosophers of the future who, although they continue to be friends of the truth, 'will certainly not be dogmatists'.<sup>6</sup> We may, of course, want to question whether a truth that is valid only for a particular individual can really be called truth at all - surely in order to use the word 'truth' we need to use some criteria to distinguish it from falsehood? And what, from Nietzsche's point of view, might such criteria be? One possible problem with Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' is that it is reflexive: that is, it refers back to itself and so cannot claim to be 'true' for anyone other than Nietzsche himself. However, Nietzsche would no doubt view this as a strength rather than as a weakness of his philosophy, and would reply to critics of his 'perspectivism' that 'my judgment is *my* judgment: no one else is easily entitled to it... great things remain for the great.'<sup>7</sup>

In his other books (notably *The Gay Science*) Nietzsche argues that, although science takes its rigorous pursuit of objective truth from the moral command to be always truthful, this scientific project has in the end destroyed belief in the God who once provided the authority that enforced moral values. In other words, Christian teaching, taken to its rational conclusion, eventually undermines itself. This idea is summed up in Nietzsche's famous proclamation that 'God is dead... and we have killed him.'<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche intends this claim as a statement of fact, perhaps a prophecy, rather than as a cry of either triumph or lament. The death of God, indeed, represents both a danger and an opportunity. The danger is that the disappearance of the traditional source of value and meaning will give Europe the final push into nihilism; but this also provides the opportunity to create new values in place of the old religious ones, so that each individual assumes the role of a god by becoming the source of his or her own values. Since Nietzsche believes that truths and values have always been invented by human beings, there is something honest and courageous about this new era that dawns after the death of God, as if we are finally facing up to the way things are.

### *Good and Evil, Good and Bad*

Nietzsche's main criticism of the ideal of truth is the same as his criticism of moral ideals: he dislikes their claims to be absolute. The philosophical model for absolute truth is Plato's theory of the Forms, which states that what is true must be unchanging, eternal and independent of the particular perspective, opinion and prejudice of the existing individual. Such a truth stands outside history, outside life itself, and applies to everyone regardless of their culture, language or personal circumstances. In other words, this kind of truth is objective and universal. Nietzsche argues that this ideal of truth is itself a fiction, a falsification of the ever-changing and diverse world we live in: 'it meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life, when one spoke of spirit and the good as Plato did.'<sup>9</sup> According to his own arguments against the value of truth, this view would not necessarily be negative, but it does show truth to be inadequate on its own terms and makes the pursuit of truth seem rather ridiculous. More importantly, though, Nietzsche believes that a standard that applies to everyone cannot really be valuable at all, because achieving such a standard gives no distinction. For example, if everybody did A-levels and got 'A' grades, the qualification would have no value; if we told an artist that 'anyone could paint that picture', he would certainly be offended.

Nietzsche uses this argument to undermine morality, and to claim that absolute moral values lead to a culture of mediocrity and nihilism: 'how should there be a 'common good'! The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value.'<sup>10</sup> The terms 'good and evil' and 'slave morality' refer to this absolutist morality, and Nietzsche contrasts the values of 'good and evil' with the values of 'good and bad' (or 'master morality'). Things are 'good' or 'bad' according to a particular perspective, in the sense that we say that something is 'good for me' or 'bad for me' (or 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'). For instance, a poisonous plant may be 'bad for me', and from another perspective it may play a crucial role in the ecosystem, but it would not make much sense to describe it as 'evil'. To say such a thing would imply that the plant was bad *in itself*, or objectively, whereas Nietzsche would argue that it is only particular perspectives that make value judgments possible at all.

A year after he published *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote a book called *The Genealogy of Morals*, in which he clarifies and develops his analysis of the opposition between 'master' and 'slave' moralities. As its title suggests, this text offers a genealogy, or an historical account, of the evolution of moral values - a method which itself undermines the idea that such values are absolutely, eternally, objectively true and valid. In primitive societies, says Nietzsche, stronger people (the masters) will naturally dominate weaker people (the slaves), and so what is good and valuable will be determined by the powerful ruling elites. These value judgments come from the masters' sense of superiority, from their self-confidence and pride in their strength and talents; they would not expect weaker individuals to achieve or even to aim for their high standards, and they would not wish to impose their values onto others. Because the weaker, down-trodden section of society are powerless to take revenge on their oppressors by means of force, they label the aggressive, arrogant ethic of their masters as 'evil' and 'unjust' ('bad in itself', when really they mean 'bad for me'), and preach values such as humility, meekness and pity. In effect, this 'slave morality'

makes a virtue out of necessity, turning weakness into a moral value and expecting everyone to conform to it. According to Nietzsche, the ethical teachings of the Jewish law and, even more so, of Christianity, spring from this thirst for vengeance exercised by the weak upon the strong: 'moral judgments and condemnations constitute the favourite revenge of the spiritually limited against those less limited.'<sup>11</sup>

This interpretation of morality is often misunderstood, so we must clarify a few important points before we can begin to judge and debate it. Nietzsche's description of the evolution of morals may be more or less accurate, but it should be read not as a factual historical account but as a myth that emphasises that values change through time rather than being intrinsic to some sort of eternal 'human nature'. Indeed, as soon as Nietzsche introduces his distinction between master and slave moralities in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he makes it clear that these two types are often combined within one society, and 'even in the same human being, within a *single* soul.'<sup>12</sup> This helps to explain why morality, which is often assumed to be rational and coherent, usually turns out to be quite contradictory 'in the real world', for real human beings. We must also be clear that Nietzsche is not arguing for a return to the values of a barbaric, primitive culture; he recognises that the development of morality has created more civilised, more complex and more profound societies, and that this has empowered humanity as a whole. He admires not so much the cruelty and violence of the 'masters', but the affirmative, creative origins of their values; and he is critical of the reactive nature of 'slave' morality rather than of particular virtues such as compassion and mercy - although he also emphasises that these virtues are hypocritical in so far as they conceal a desire for power and revenge. Just as Nietzsche argues that truth fails by its own standards, so he suggests that morality rests on a corrupt foundation.

### *Beyond Good and Evil?*

Nietzsche attacks morality because he believes that it produces the values of 'the lowest common denominator' and imposes them on everyone, thus inhibiting creative individuals and preventing them from inventing the new values that could save Europe from nihilism. However, he also recognises that not everyone is strong enough for the task of creating values, and that weaker people need to be given rules and conventions to conform to. This view may seem reasonable enough, but how could it be put into practice? How can we decide which people these rules should apply to - and who decides? Does the exceptional, creative individual have to leave society? Is isolation the price of greatness - and if so, how is such a person supposed to change the destiny of European culture? Nietzsche leaves such questions open for us to struggle with, although he does offer a poetic presentation of these issues in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

There is another set of questions surrounding the positive content of Nietzsche's philosophy. His attack upon absolute truth and moral values is much clearer and easier to understand than his account of the kind of values that are supposed to replace them. This is to some extent inevitable, for it would be contradictory to give someone precise instructions on how to be creative, and perhaps we should accept that Nietzsche's writing aims to inspire individuality rather than to prescribe it. There are, however, a few notoriously enigmatic suggestions about what lies beyond good and evil - most of which are discussed in Nietzsche's notebooks, which were published after his death under the title *The Will to Power*. These suggestions include the

*Übermensch*, or 'higher man'; the attitude of *amor fati*, or 'love of fate'; and the rather obscure doctrine of the 'eternal recurrence'. Since only the eternal recurrence is mentioned in *Beyond Good and Evil*, I shall end my discussion of the text by considering what this may involve.

The idea of eternal recurrence was originally an ancient Greek philosophical theory, and it struck Nietzsche with the force of a life-changing revelation one day as he stood contemplating a large rock by the side of an Alpine lake. Instead of viewing time as a linear progression, the doctrine of eternal recurrence teaches that every moment repeats itself continually throughout eternity.

This idea may be extremely difficult to grasp, but its significance for Nietzsche is relatively straightforward: if someone was faced with the thought that every moment of her life would recur eternally, could she accept this happily, without fear or regret? To do so, suggests Nietzsche, would be the ultimate affirmation of the value of life - the absolute opposite, in fact, of the longing for death and for another world beyond this one that, he claims, characterises Platonism and Christianity. Nietzsche describes the eternal recurrence as 'the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity.'<sup>13</sup> We must add here that this expresses no naive optimism on Nietzsche's part: he himself endured great mental and physical suffering throughout his life, and he claimed that the joyful acceptance of eternal recurrence was possible only for those who had also faced the abyss of despair. It is this despair, indeed, that makes the total affirmation of life so great and rare an achievement.

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### *Further Reading*

- Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1998)  
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)  
Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Books, 1961)  
Paul Strathern, *The Essential Nietzsche* (London: Virgin Books, 2002)  
Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2001)  
Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980)  
Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1994)  
Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990)

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, 68-99.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 1; section 16.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, section 4.

<sup>4</sup> The following example is not Nietzsche's, but it raises issues that Nietzsche discusses frequently throughout his writing.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 9; see also section 39.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, section 43.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, section 43.

<sup>8</sup> See Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, section 125.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, section 43.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, section 219.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, section 260.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, section 56. See also *The Gay Science*, section 341, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Chapter Three, 'The Convalescent'.