Chapter 27
Nietzsche: Critique of Western Culture

Key Words: Religion and Morality, Will to power, master morality, slave morality, herd morality, overman, superman, death of god, good and evil, moral nihilism.

Introduction

Frederich Nietzsche is arguably the most important philosopher of 20th century in terms of his influence on many contemporary thinkers, like Heidegger, Foucault, Rorty and many others who belong to the different schools of thought. Rorty even says that 20th century philosophy is to a great extend post-Nietzschean philosophy. In all sense he was an unconventional thinker and an ardent critic of modernity.

Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Rocken in Prussia and his early education was on literature, particularly, Greek and German literature. In 1865, he joined the University of Leipzig and it was during this time, he started distancing from the Christian faith. In 1869, started teaching classical philology at the University of Basel, but soon poor health forced him to end his teaching career. In 1889 he had a sudden mental breakdown and became psychotic and he died in 1890.

Nietzsche was the advocate of a culture and society that would create stronger and more fully-developed individuals. He thought that, the major hurdle in realizing this is the moral and ideological spirit of the modern age. While many of his contemporaries saw modernity as a boon, offering humanity a more meaningful world, Nietzsche conceived it as the major obstacle towards human development. He waged an uncompromising war against the prevailing rational, moral and religious approaches to human reality. He argues that, “mankind does not represent a development toward something better or stronger or higher, in the sense accepted today. “Progress” is merely a modern idea, that is, a false idea.” [Nietzsche: Preface to The Antichrist] It will be interesting to read these lines along with what another
Aspects of Western Philosophy: Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappilly, IIT Madras

great thinker of 20th century, Sigmund Freud said about modern culture. He says: “I have been careful to refrain from the enthusiastic prejudice that sees our civilization as the most precious thing we possess or can acquire, and believes that its path will necessarily lead us to heights of perfection hitherto undreamt of.” [Freud: Civilization and its Discontents]

Nietzsche’s critique of Western Civilization begins with his comparison of the nineteenth-century European and German culture with the culture of ancient Greece. He argues that, compared to the high culture of the latter, the former is sick and inferior and it worships weakness and mediocrity. He then examines the important features of the superior Greek civilization, which according to him was a blend of Dionysian and Apollonian traits, the two central principles in Greek culture. The creative conflicts between these two contrasting traits were responsible for the superiority of Greek civilization and were responsible for all the fabulous achievements it made in various fields of human enquiries.

Apollo and Dionysus are the two Greek Gods, who exhibit contrasting characters. Apollo is the god of medicine, music and poetry. He is also the god of archery. Those who share the Apollonian traits are well ordered, rational and serene. Nietzsche claims that all types of form or structure and rational thought are Apollonian. On the other hand, Dionysians are wild, frenzied and sensuous, as Dionysus is the god of ecstasy, terror, guilt and atonement, death and resurrection, vegetation, trees, wine, madness, and drama. According to Nietzsche, all forms of enthusiasm and ecstasy are Dionysian. The ancient Greek civilization had witnessed a fruitful merger of these two contradictory traits, where the principle of individuation, self-control, order, and equilibrium was merged with the inclination to break any border and norm, and to lose self-control. This was responsible for the glory of ancient Greek civilization, which according to Nietzsche did not last long.

The Greek culture soon encountered more rational and systematic philosophical systems sphere headed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They have idealized the rational element and disregarded the passionate aspects. Nietzsche argues that the spirit of dialectics severely damaged the primordial instincts and life forces of man and culture. He introduces the notion of will to power in this context,
which are the fundamental driving forces of all living creatures and the basic impulse of all our acts.

According to Nietzsche, life is an instinct of growth, for survival, for the accumulation of forces and for power. Life itself is Will to Power, he affirms. It is essentially an instinct for growth and for continuance. He disregards all other values and virtues of life, which the rational ethical traditions of post-Socratic philosophies have advocated. Instead, Nietzsche idealizes power and argues that nothing in life has value except the degree of power. He affirms that, where the will to power is lacking there is decline. Criticizing the so-called supreme values of mankind, he argues that they all are characterized by a lack of will to Power.

This will to power is not just a will to survive or preserve one’s existence. Instead, it is a proactive force: to act in life and not just to react. Nietzsche says that every living thing does everything it can, not just to preserve it and simply exist, but to become more. But at the same time, it is not a power over others, but the feelings of creative energy and control over oneself that are necessary to achieve self-creation, self-direction and to express individual creativity.

The most important obstacle in the path of realizing this will is moral and religious beliefs and the social establishments created to promote them. Nietzsche affirms that all morality and religion are against this, as all of them demand submission. According to Nietzsche, all of them are anti-nature and anti-body and they attempt to discipline the body and to kill the will to power. They try to replace the will with obedience and the natural freedom with submission and creativity with loyalty.

Ancient culture was free from the grip of these moral and religious traditions. With the emergence of the rational philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle, the decline begins. According to Nietzsche, they discounted the body as the seat of emotions and idealized the rational mind over the passionate will. As a result they idealized tame mediocrity. Later, with the rise of Christianity this decline was complete. The Church demanded complete submission and it developed a morality that idealized obedience and loyalty. Modernity has not changed the situation drastically, as its philosophical perspective too was keen on developing ethical
frameworks that subsume the body and its passions. The creation of mediocrity has become the central motif of Western civilization. As a result of all these, the Western civilization has been dominated by a morality of the good and evil.

To clarify this further, Nietzsche introduces a distinction between master morality and herd morality. The master morality tries to dominate and it is antithetical to all forms of submission. It follows the bodily drives and never tries to submit it to any other form of authority like reason or religious beliefs. It rejects the fundamental distinction every moral traditions make; between good and evil. In this sense, it is beyond good and evil and even, beyond morality.

On the other hand, slave morality is the morality of submission and slavery. It is created by domesticating the body. Nietzsche says that the ascetic priests have created the slave morality as negating the body was essential in their programme. They transformed powerlessness and resentment into discipline and social control. Nietzsche observes that, it is with the creation of this slave morality the weak took revenge on the strong. He says that slave morality “channels resentment inward against the body and outward against enemies of the herd”. He adds that by domesticating the body the weaker individuals resent the prerogatives of the stronger and carried out a transvaluation of values, overturning previous master morality in favor of slave moralities which promise salvation in a future heaven in exchange for submission and obedience to social forces and institutions.

This morality, which insists on disciplining the body by suppressing all bodily drives and passions, is the morality of the herd. It negates and sacrifices the body. As mentioned above, it insists that the individual should submit him/herself and be obedient to the social forces and institutions for the sake of salvation in a future heaven. Nietzsche observes that religions, particularly Christianity in Europe, have promoted such a herd morality. He argues that, Christianity became popular in Europe with the majority adopting it. It was the Roman slave class, which initially adopted Christianity, who afterwards idealized its moral framework in order to justify their liberation from their oppressors. They universalized slavery and insisted that everyone should observe the authority of the Church and its doctrines, which was intolerant to all forms of individual brilliance.
The herd morality works on the basis of the dichotomy of good and evil. Nietzsche thus calls it a morality of good and evil. He argues that this dichotomy was at the base of the modern sickness. According to the moral framework of Christianity the good represents the divine that is responsible for the intrinsic value people and the world possess. Since all are God’s creations, Christianity propagates a form of equality, a form of soul atomism, which asserts that all souls are at the equal level. Nietzsche is of the view that this idea that all are equals, undercuts the very notion of human development, which presupposes a free exercise of the will to power, suppression and domination.

Nietzsche says that, for these reasons the slaves viewed the behavior of the powerful warrior types as evil. The latter are uninhibited by conscience and hence are considered as ruthless. Therefore, the morality of the good and evil considers the morality of the strong men who dominate and rule as evil. Nietzsche argues that it is only among the strong we find an expression of independent brilliance. Such men are capable of realizing their desires directly by freely exercising their passions and will to power. On the other hand, the weak represents cowardice and helplessness and find themselves overshadowed by the strong. Despite being a minority the strong exercises their will to power and dominates. The weak therefore have invented the morality of good and evil or the herd morality in order to liberate themselves from the strong men and their master morality. They have eventually invented the notion of evil to characterize what is at the core of the behaviour of the strong.

The herd morality, with its conception of good and evil thus rescued them from their enslavement. The weak liberated themselves by making everyone weak. They were intolerant towards all who exhibit independent brilliance and therefore, are capable of defining their own place in the world. Nietzsche sees this creation of the new morality as the revenge of the weak and helpless upon the strong. While commenting upon the 19th century European culture and its conception of the intrinsic worth of moral values Nietzsche observes:

The intrinsic worth of these values was taken for granted as a fact of experience and put beyond question. Nobody, up to now, has doubted that the “good” man represents a higher value than the “evil,” in terms of promoting and benefiting mankind generally, even taking the long view. But suppose the
exact opposite were true….What if morality should turn out to be the danger of dangers?... [Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals]

He thus wages a war against the very underlying conception of the morality that maintains a distinction between good and evil. Opposing the ways in which morality was conceived in human societies, Nietzsche argues that since morality is not a science, there cannot be any moral facts. He observes that morality has been based on obedience and the authority of the social institutions, rules and the church had played a crucial role in instituting it. He then argues that moral and religious judgments belong to a level of ignorance, as all value judgments concerning life are stupidities.

Nietzsche makes a detail analysis of what is understood as modern morality, which according to him is characterized by its complete neglect of the will to power and other important passions of life. He maintains that the two prominent schools of modern ethics, utilitarianism and Kantian ethics have reduced the great passion of living to calculations and difficult formulas. According to him these two great traditions have weakened the human spirit by controlling and domesticating its creativity and selfish passions. They have contributed to creating and strengthening the herd morality, which in its essence consists in a denial of life. On the other hand Nietzsche maintains that life is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation. [Nietzsche: Beyond good and Evil]

Nietzsche then examines what constitutes the basis of morality and affirms that it is the conception of universal and unchanging Truth. The ideas of God and other-worldliness advocated by Christianity and other religions are associated with this notion. Christianity postulates a notion, which believes in the essential goodness in human nature. In the philosophical traditions we find conceptions of human nature being identified with the rational faculty. Since Plato onwards this tendency was strong in Western thought. Christianity divinized this notion and postulated its conception of good on the basis of the idea human nature, which by virtue of being a creation of God, is divine in nature. In the enlightenment era, philosophers like Kant further developed the idea of the essential rational faculty in man and tried to base their ethical theories upon it.
During the modern age this idea of unchanging universal truth has undergone some changes, particularly with the historical approach initiated by Darwin and Hegel. This new perspective has given rise to the notion of Truth that evolves. As a consequence, this notion of truth cannot claim an absolute status. Since it evolves, the changing times and places may have important impacts on its conceptualization. In other words, this position makes the idea of a perspectival truth sensible. This changed perspective on truth has also challenged conceptions of universal truth and universal human nature.

Following these insights Nietzsche argues that the notion of otherworldliness, which is central to Christian morality, is invented in order to ensure smooth succession of the status quo. It prevents all free exercise of the will to power from individuals and effectively check all emergence and expressions of individual brilliance. The underlying herd morality intends to promote equality, which demands unconditional submission from individuals. What then is truth according to Nietzsche? He says:

Truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms in, in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. [Nietzsche: “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”]

Nietzsche develops his moral nihilism, from this general nihilistic position, which denies truth any universal value. His theory affirms that truth is undoubtedly perspectival. Hence we can no longer maintain any distinction between good and evil. This nihilism makes everything permitted, a position which will open up a boundless area of freedom of strong men and races to freely exercise their will to power and dominate and realize their development. Dichotomies that were central to moral philosophy like just and unjust, good and evil are irrelevant in such a situation.

Nietzsche argues that modern age has made this nihilism inevitable and this had ultimately resulted in the death of God, where the latter stood for all that is universally and eternally divine and right. The phrase “death of God” is used for
indicating the modern scenario where people have lost faith in absolute values and truths. This has resulted in the spread of perspectivalism. The idea of God that unites all men and gives meaning to human life had died.

With this death of God the moral foundations of Christianity was shattered and the “thou shalt” which contains the gist of the Christian moral commandment lost its meaning. God’s death had created a big vacuum, as it made any form of moral absolute impossible. In Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the protagonist has prophesied about the moral vacuum that came into being after the death of God and has proclaimed the need for discovering new realities for man. He insists on creating new meaning out of the chaotic aftermath of God's death. The concept of overman or superman is introduced in this context. This overcoming of man has to be achieved undergoing three stages of moral development: the stages of the Camel, the Lion and the Child.

The Camel represents the average man, who unquestionably accepts the authority of the “thou shalt”. The camel’s attitude of kneeling down in accepting its load is comparable to the average human being’s attitude of kneeling down to carry the weight of what he/she believe are his/her duties. These duties are prescribed by the society and religious traditions and moral conventions determine what they are. Their major purpose is to normalize the individual, to control his/her individual brilliance and merge him/her with the common moral framework of the society. Like the camel, the average man for whom the “thou shalt” is sacred, the sense of duty is so integral in his self-conception and any violation of the same will invoke a sense of guilt in him/her. The individual, without any protest accepts the burden of the “thou shalt”. As the camel who does not will what it does and only simply obeys what it “ought to do”, the average man gives his will to what he believes are his duties.

In the next stage in the path of moral transformation, the camel converts itself into a lion. Nietzsche says that, like the camel that moves in the desert the spirit moves in its own desert and in the loneliest desert the spirit becomes a lion. He then recognizes the need for freedom and urges to win it and be the master in his own desert. He wants to fight with the great dragon; the “thou shalt”, which is the major hurdle in the metamorphosis of the spirit to the higher state of existence. The spirit
encounters the “thou shalt” in its desert and with a violent negation, kills it. The spirit of the lion says, "I will" and finds the dragon of the “thou shalt” on its way to its freedom and annihilates it.

Nietzsche observes that, even after killing the “thou shalt”, the lion is not completely free from the morality of good and evil. He once loved the "thou shalt" and has treated it as most sacred and now he seeks freedom from this love. The nihilism of the moral imperative, which results from the killing of the “thou shalt” creates a vacuum, which is unfamiliar to the lion. Moreover, it has still not completely liberated itself from its past. It has succeeded in negating the existing moral frameworks by killing the “thou shalt”, but it fails to fill the vacuum with a new morality, which is completely free from the parameters of the earlier one. This new moral outlook demands a further evolution; from the lion to the child. Nietzsche writes:

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes." For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred "Yes" is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers the world. [Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, part I, Walter Kaufmann transl.]

The child thus represents the real character one aspires to attain. It is absolutely unremorseful of what it does, as it is unaffected by the morality of the good and evil. It thus represents the overman who says “Yes” to life and creates a new reality and a new self. The child applies its will in developing and achieving unique values and developing autonomy. It creates itself, as no models whatsoever influences it.

Nietzsche’s overman is a strong and free individual who has overcome the man in himself. Nietzsche repeatedly summons that we have to overcome the man in us; the man who surrenders, who loves the “thou shalt”, and who finds console in the status co. This overman has overcome his trivial, weak, petty tendencies that make him a lover of the status co. and worshipper of the “thou shalt” through a process of self-overcoming. Consequently he rejects all creations of his self by external factors like religion and morality, He instead creates himself. He has not only overcome the “thou shalt” and the idea of the “ought to be” but also does what he wills. In other
words, he exercises his will to power. He creates his own values, and lives fully and passionately.

Nietzsche adds that, the overman creates a unique new master morality, which is free from the old values and customs. In this sense he is his own judge. He self-creates by overcoming, mastering and transforming his inner chaos into a new order. This however is not an easy task and Nietzsche reminds that only a few individuals succeed in this. Yet he is optimistic about the emergence of the new aristocrats, with their new morality ruling the world. They subscribe to a morality of unequal souls striving to reject the status quo, the “thou shalt” and overpower others. Though they exercise the will to power, among them they practice a different and unique morality. They recognize that they have equal strength and consequently they form a social body existing without necessarily injuring or exploiting others.

In the history of European philosophy, particularly the modern western thought, Nietzsche is a seminal thinker who entertained unique ideas and his theories still exert phenomenal influence on many of the contemporary thinkers. His philosophy does not give us a clear direction in the sense that it prescribes a goal for all human beings. Yet, we may find the presence of teleology in his thought. He identifies a central feature that according to him needs to be nurtured; the will to power. Nevertheless, his teleology is characteristically different from that of many other thinkers. For instance, Aristotle propagates a teleological outlook where he posits eudemonia as the ultimate human goal. He also prescribes a way in which this goal can be attained; by leading a virtuous life. In this way, his approach is prescriptive. But Nietzsche adopts a very different approach. He says:

The new values, and the process of value creation are not prescriptive: “‘This – is now my way, – where is yours?’ Thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way – does not exist!” [Thus Spake Zarathustra]

The metamorphosis of the spirit is not a standardized metaphysical programme. Each one of us has to encounter this in our life and negotiate with our unique situations. There is no “the way” to be prescribed, but we have to discover our own path. No wonder Nietzsche was widely respected by the existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger and the postmodernists like Foucault and Rorty.
Quiz

1. Why did Nietzsche hold that the nineteenth-century European and German culture and Western civilization are sick and inferior compared to the culture of ancient Greece?
   (a) Because it is materialistic  (b) Because it is mechanistic  (c) Because it worships weakness and mediocrity  (d) because it is secular.

2. The will to power is not a will to:
   (a) Survive  (b) Become more  (c) Have control over oneself  (d) Achieve self-creation.

3. Which is characteristic of slave morality?
   (a) Invented by the ruling class to enslave others  (b) Emphasizes self-discipline  (c) Does not believe in the authority of universal reason  (d) Domesticates the body.

4. The basis of herd morality is:
   (a) The dichotomy of good and evil  (b) The idea of passion  (c) The notion of strength  (d) The concept of will to power.

5. Which of the following does not characterize an overman?
   (a) Exercises his will to power  (b) Follows human values  (c) Creates his own values  (d) Lives fully and passionately.

Answer Key
1. [c]
2. [a]
3. [d]
4. [a]
5. [b]

Assignment

1. Discuss Nietzsche’s reevaluation of values.

2. Discuss the overcoming of man through the three stages of moral development as outlined by Nietzsche.

References
Books


**Web Resources**


