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Winter 2007

### Philosophy 285: Nietzsche's Critique of Morality

The focus of this seminar will be Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian morality, a critique that he identifies with the project of a "revaluation of all values." We will analyze this project both from within the context of Nietzsche's own thought (e.g. its relation to will to power, perspectivism, nihilism) and in terms of its lasting impact on our understanding of morality as a normative practice and system of belief. With respect to the latter, we will look closely toward the end of the quarter at selections from the growing secondary literature that attempts to make sense of Nietzsche's "revaluation" in terms of the discourse of contemporary metaethics. However, I do not want to lose sight of the "revaluation" as, most basically, a manifestation of the trajectory of *Nietzsche's* thought: the culmination of his life-long attack on the foundations of the Western metaphysical-moral tradition.

During the final period of his productive life, Nietzsche conceived of "the revaluation of all values" as the title, or subtitle, of what would be his most explosive book, one that would "split humanity into two halves" and leave "the whole earth in convulsions" (*Selected Letters*, 311, 326). The significance of this project, however, transcends any single philosophical work. Nietzsche identifies it as his singular "task," his "fate," his "destiny," the end towards which all his capacities are directed (EH II, 9). It is the undertaking which explains and demands his utmost solitude. "I am alone now, absurdly alone," he writes to Reinhart von Seydlitz in February 1888, "and in the course of my relentless and underground struggle against everything that human beings till now have revered and loved (my formula for this is the "revaluation of all values"), I have imperceptibly become something like a lair myself—something hidden away, which people do not find, even if they go out and look for it" (*Selected Letters*, 283).

The project of the revaluation of values emerges gradually in Nietzsche's writings. In his pre-*Zarathustra* works, he has already called into question our implicit faith in morality, our failure even to entertain the question, why moral rather than immoral? In the *Genealogy of Morals*, the question is re-posed as one of the value of moral values. "Let us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called into question*.... One has taken the *value* of these 'values' as given, as factual, as beyond all question; one has hitherto never doubted or hesitated in the slightest degree in supposing 'the good man' to be of greater value than 'the evil man'" (GM, Pref. 6). In the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche refines his problem by insisting on the perspectival character of all value judgments. "The question: what is the *value* of this or that table of values and 'morals'? should be viewed from the most diverse perspectives; for the problem 'value for what?' cannot be examined too subtly" (GM I, 17).

In addressing this problem, Nietzsche makes it clear that for him a primacy must be assigned to the perspective of "life." "When we speak of values," he writes in *Twilight of*

*the Idols*, “we do so under the inspiration and from the perspective of life: life itself evaluates through us *when* we establish values” (TI V 5). In the absence of any metaphysical foundation for value—the conclusion of Nietzsche’s independent attack on the reality of moral values<sup>1</sup>—whatever values one posits are simply the manifestation of a certain type of life.<sup>2</sup> This being so, we are forced to confront what Nietzsche describes as “the gravest question of all”: “What, seen in the perspective of *life*, is the significance of morality?” (BT, Pref. 4).

Nietzsche’s answer is unequivocal. Christian morality—the morality of good and evil—invariably works against the “concerns, considerations, and contrivances of life” (TI V, 6). “Behind this mode of thought and valuation,” he writes, “I never failed to sense a *hostility to life*—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself” (BT, Pref. 5). Morality, he suggests, is symptomatic of a kind of life which, out of its suffering and weakness, wills its own demise. “One understands what is hiding under [morality’s] most sacred names and value-formulas: impoverished life, the will to the end, the great weariness. Morality negates life” (CW, Pref.). In its final form, Nietzsche’s condemnation of the value scheme of Christianity is total:

What mankind has so far considered seriously have not even been realities but mere imaginings—more strictly speaking, *lies* prompted by the bad instincts of sick natures that were harmful in the most profound sense—all these concepts, “God,” “soul,” “virtue,” “sin,” “beyond,” “truth,” “eternal life.”—But the greatness of human nature, its “divinity” was sought in them.—All the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through because one mistook the most harmful men for great men—because one learned to despise “little” things, which means the basic concerns of life itself (EH, “Why I Am So Clever,” 10).<sup>3</sup>

The vitriol and bombast that mark Nietzsche’s denunciation of Judeo-Christian morality make it easy to reject his case out of hand. Nevertheless, however extreme Nietzsche’s views may seem, they represent a provocative challenge to the orthodoxies of Western thought. For this reason alone, they warrant our consideration.

In order to respond intelligently to Nietzsche’s “revaluation of all values,” we need to understand better what type of philosophical project it is—what type of support, in the broadest sense, he is able to offer for such contentious claims. Here we are confronted by the problem that there is—to put it mildly—no consensus about how to understand Nietzsche’s underlying philosophical commitments. Some (e.g. Richardson, Schacht) have sought to ground Nietzsche’s revaluation in a “metaphysical system” centered on

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<sup>1</sup> “Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment that it believes in realities which do not exist.... To this extent moral judgment is never to be taken literally: as such it never contains anything but nonsense” (TI VII 1).

<sup>2</sup> “[E]ven that *anti-nature of a morality* which conceives of God as the contrary concept to and condemnation of life is only a value judgment on the part of life...” (TI V 5).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. EH, “Birth of Tragedy,” 2; “Why I Am Destiny,” 1-6, 8.

the notion of “will to power.” Others (e.g. Magnus) have stressed Nietzsche’s desire to distance himself from anything like a traditional metaphysics, adding that the evidence for will to power as a fundamental ontology is largely limited to his unpublished *Nachlass* (excerpts of which were gathered by his sister in the book *The Will to Power*) as against the works that Nietzsche himself chose to publish. Yet others (e.g. Leiter) have argued that Nietzsche should be seen as a “methodological naturalist” who takes as his starting point the perspective of contemporary (19<sup>th</sup>-century) science and a naturalistic understanding of human beings, while rejecting the idea that a univocal standard of value can be drawn directly from nature.

Getting clear on these preliminaries will be one of the objectives of our initial meetings as we read through *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Genealogy of Morals*. Thereafter we should have a better basis for evaluating the diverse interpretations advanced of the revaluation project itself.