



NIETZSCHE AND POSTMODERN THOUGHT

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is quite controversial as a result of his critique of the foundations of Western philosophy, and particularly so because of the legacy of his political thought, as his ideas were used in the 20th century in the service of Nazi propaganda—even though at the end of the 19th century he was a harsh critic of antisemitism and German nationalism. The complexity and difficulty of his political thought is evident in the fact that just as the Nazis were attempting to appropriate his thought in the 1930s, the German existentialist thinker Karl Jaspers, an opponent of the Nazis, makes clear that his book on Nietzsche (1936) was written to counter the Nazi interpretation, to use against the Nazis the philosophy of the one “whom they had proclaimed as their own philosopher.” Nietzsche’s thought was influential across the political spectrum in Europe in the first half of the 20th century as Marxists also tried to find ways, despite Nietzsche’s criticism of socialism, to find points of affinity with Marx’s thought. Nietzsche’s political thought is notoriously difficult to pin down, though it can be said that, like Plato, he was critical of democracy, finding it difficult to expect that the popular opinion of the masses could lead to the highest development of humankind. Nietzsche was suspicious of democratic ideals, finding the leveling influence of the modern liberal State to result in a herd mentality. Like others before him, Nietzsche was very suspicious of the notion of natural rights, since human nature in his view is not something fixed that can be merely discovered. He was suspicious, then, of the notion of equal rights for all; and thus put forward, especially in his late writings, an “aristocratic radicalism” emphasizing *orders of rank*. One cannot simply dismiss Nietzsche’s thought as it has had such a pervasive impact in multiple directions upon contemporary thought. If one wants to defend democracy and the importance of human rights today, one has to resist and contest aspects of his philosophy, while accepting the challenge of his thought, mindful of his suspicions.

While Nietzsche’s writings were used across the political spectrum in the first part of the 20th century, they became very influential in latter part of the century on what has been called Postmodern Thought. This philosophical movement developed in France, starting in the late 1960s, with the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, as well as others, including American philosophers Richard Rorty and Fredric Jameson. These thinkers developed a radical critique of modern philosophy very much influenced by Nietzsche’s critique of modern philosophy. Nietzsche has sometimes been thought of as a sort of postmodern prophet in his critique of modern philosophy and attempt to envision the “philosophers of the future.” The postmodern condition was once famously described by the Lyotard as an “incredulity toward metanarratives.” What Lyotard meant is a general suspicion regarding any attempts to tell the grand story, the ‘ultimate and real’ account of what it is all about, the meaning of existence, the final truth about reality. Postmodern thought has been described as “anti-foundationalism.” If modern philosophy begins with Descartes’ attempt to provide a solid foundation for knowledge, postmodern philosophy begins with the recognition that there is no such ground.

The most famous passage in Nietzsche's writings where he suggests this loss of ground, and thus the incredulity toward metanarratives and the crisis of modernity that results is this passage about the "death of God":

The madman. —Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning light, ran to the marketplace, and shouted incessantly, 'I seek God! I seek God!?' As there were many people standing together who did not believe in God, he caused much amusement. 'Is He lost?', asked one. 'Did he wander off like a child?', asked another. 'Or is He hiding? Is He afraid of us?' 'Has He gone to sea? Has He emigrated?' And in this manner they shouted and laughed. Then the madman leaped into their midst, and looked at them with piercing eyes and cried, "Where did God go? I will tell you! *We have killed Him*—you and I. We are all his murderers! But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it heading? Where are we heading? Away from all suns? Are we not constantly falling? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothingness? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is night not falling evermore? Mustn't lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we hear nothing yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing yet of the divine putrefaction? For even gods putrefy! God is dead. God remains dead! And we have killed Him! How shall we, the most murderous of all murderers, ever console ourselves? The holiest and mightiest thing that the world has ever known has bled to death under our knives—who will wash this blood clean from our hands? With what water might we be purified? What lustrations, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not become gods ourselves, if only to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed—and because of it, whoever is born after us belongs to a higher history than all history hitherto!

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they, too, were silent and stared at him, baffled. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, so that it broke into pieces and went out. 'I have come too early,' he then said, 'this is not yet the right time. This tremendous event is still on its way and headed toward them—word of it has not yet reached men's ears. Even after they are over and done with, thunder and lightning take time, the light of the stars takes time, and deeds too take time, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is further away from them than the farthest star—and yet they have done it themselves.' (*The Joyous Science*, §125)

This passage is widely known but little understood. When they hear that Nietzsche said 'God is dead,' most think that he was speaking literally, that he was stating what he understood to be the truth about God. However, if one understands anything of Nietzsche's thought, it is clear that he isn't trying to state a truth about God, but is rather calling into question the very notion of truth. The 'death of God' is a metaphor for Nietzsche about the end, or death, of the very notion of truth that has served as a foundation for Western thought. Another of the distinguishing features of postmodern thought is the collapse of the boundary between philosophy and literature. Whereas traditional philosophy sought to be as literal as possible, reducing the discourse to clearly stated arguments that remain stable, Nietzsche often exploits the metaphorical character of language, writing philosophy as literature. The madman passage is a good example as it is not an argument but a little literary vignette. The 'sun' of course is the most important metaphor in the history of Western thought—it is that last thing to be seen after the prisoner escapes from the cave to the upper world in Plato's allegory of the cave. The sun is an image for the notion of the Form of the Good, the highest Form in the realm of the Forms that is, for Plato, the true world. The sun is an image, then, for the very notion of a stable, unchanging, absolute truth. The notion of an absolute truth is the idea of the metanarrative. It is the notion that there is a true story, the metanarrative, behind all the stories we tell ourselves about reality. Thus, for Plato, there is an absolute truth about *justice*, something that reason can discover, by which we can measure all the

stories we tell ourselves about justice. Plato's notion of absolute truth was absorbed into Christianity, and most Christians accept today the notion that the Bible, especially the New Testament, is the metanarrative about God. Most Christians simply assume that their story about God is the true one; it is the metanarrative, and all other stories about God or gods in other religions are false. The madman's announcement about the 'death of God' calls into question this metanarrative, and the belief in metanarratives. But the madman's announcement in this passage is directed not to the believers, but rather to the unbelievers, the ones who laughed at the search for God. He leaps into their midst and confronts them with the news of the 'death of God.' The madman's news challenges both those who believe in God, who believe their belief is the only true belief, as well as those who don't believe in God, and think that their belief that there is no God is the only true belief.

Nietzsche's vignette about the 'death of God' is thus about the end of the notion of truth in Plato's sense, of a truth that remains stable and is universal and discoverable through reason. If the truth of justice were ever revealed, then all disagreement about justice would come to an end, as truth, for Plato, is universal and thus the same for all. Thus, the 'death of God' is really an announcement that perhaps the sophists were right all along in their claim that "man is the measure of all things." But Plato's notion of truth became the foundation of Western thought. Descartes assumes this notion of truth in his attempt to find something that is true beyond all doubt which could then serve as a foundation for erecting a more stable edifice of knowledge. When the madman exclaims that '*We have killed Him!*,' Nietzsche is drawing attention to the fact that the belief in such a truth that could serve as this ground has become unbelievable. In Nietzsche's day only a very few could see this—one would have to have been a 'madman' then to have seen it. But once this notion of truth becomes unbelievable, then the foundation of Western thought falls away. It would be like falling into a bottomless abyss, where one loses all orientation of up and down, falling constantly into a darkness not lit by any sun, into a dark infinite nothingness.

In later writings Nietzsche uses the word 'nihilism' to refer to this infinite nothingness and the crisis of modernity that is brought on by the 'death of God.' In his late unpublished notebooks, Nietzsche warns about the crisis of nihilism that is coming:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (*The Will to Power*, Preface, §2)

This crisis of nihilism has been understood as the crisis of modernity, something that pervades modernity, something that is felt throughout modern culture. One might consider the history of modern art as an example. Before the birth of modern art, there was the guiding metanarrative about art, inherited as well from Plato, that art has to be in some sense representational. Throughout the changes in the history of Western art, the unquestioned assumption was that art was about copying reality, whether in portraits, still lifes, landscapes, or representations of scenes in Greek, Roman, and Christian narratives, or historical events. Modern art began when this guiding metanarrative was questioned—when the 'death of God' happened in art. Throughout the period of modern art there was wide experiments in what art could be, with each

new avant-garde movement some previously unquestioned assumption about what art must be. This resulted in a development in which literally anything could be a work of art, leading some critics to despair about nihilism in art.

In regards to political philosophy, much of the attention on Nietzsche's thought has focused on his doubts about democracy and liberal notions like universal rights, and also the consequences for political philosophy of the 'death of God.' In his last writings Nietzsche warned about this unprecedented crisis the world would be facing in the future. In one of his very last writings, from the end of his autobiography, he warns about wars "the like of which have never yet been seen on earth," a warning taken now as prescient considering the world wars of the 20th century.

"... I contradict as has never been contradicted before and am nevertheless the opposite of a No-saying spirit. I am a bringer of glad tidings like no one before me; I know tasks of such elevation that any notion of them has been lacking so far; only beginning with me are there hopes again. For all that, I am necessarily also the man of calamity. For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows *great politics*." (*Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Destiny," §1)

There has been much attention in recent writings on Nietzsche's political thought on the last line of this passage. What is the *great politics* that begins with Nietzsche? The short answer to that question would be a politics after the 'death of God,' politics that begins once it is understood that there are no universal truths about justice, or no universal human rights that are merely discovered by reason. In contrast to what many have thought, the consequence of the 'death of God' results in Nietzsche's thought to a more modest philosophical position, where one disdains the arrogance of claiming that one's own narrative is the metanarrative that all others must accept because it is the truth.

Nietzsche begins to question the notion of truth in his early writings. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he gives an account of how Greek tragedy arose out of the strange coupling of two diametrically opposed art-drives, which he names after the gods Apollo and Dionysus. The apollonian drive is the drive to make sense out of existence, carving figures against the background of chaos. Take a sculpture, for example, the artist confronts an uncarved block of stone. It could be anything, and the sculptor hammers out a form. All our truths, Nietzsche suggested, are a product of this apollonian drive to bring order out of chaos. Against Plato, Nietzsche suggested that the philosopher is necessarily an artist. Truth is never purely discovered, but is the product of an artistic drive. For Plato there is a great difference between philosophers and artists, as philosophers have the serious task of discovering truths, while artists are stuck in the cave, in the dreamworld, playing with fictions. In this text Nietzsche begins to question Plato's metanarrative that the philosopher is one who has escaped the cave of the dreamworld and had woken up to the true world. Here we see Nietzsche beginning to play with the notion of the lucid dream as a metaphor for philosophy:

The analogy with dream tells us something about this naive artist. If we imagine the dreamer calling out to himself in the midst of the illusory dream world, but without disturbing it, 'It is a dream, I will dream on', and if this compels us to conclude that he is deriving intense inward pleasure from looking at the

dream, but if on the other hand the ability to dream with such inner pleasure in looking depends on us having entirely forgotten the day and its terrible importuning, then we may interpret all of these phenomena, under the guidance of Apollo, the diviner of dreams, roughly as follows. There is no doubt that, of the two halves of our lives, the waking and the dreaming half, the former strikes us being the more privileged, important, dignified, and worthy of being lived, indeed the only half that truly is lived; nevertheless, although it may seem paradoxical, I wish to assert that the very opposite evaluation of dream holds true... (*The Birth of Tragedy*, §4)

In another early text, Nietzsche questions the notion of truth, suggesting that truths are illusions that we have forgotten are illusions, worn out metaphors. He uses another metaphor to explain this. Truths are like coins that are so used that the facing has been erased and are no longer recognizable as coins:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically enhanced, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. *Truths are illusions* which we have forgotten are illusions; metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. ("On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense," 84)

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian drive is described as that drive that breaks through those Apollonian boundaries that establish identities. The Dionysian experience is then what wakes one up to the fact that one is dreaming—that what one thinks is the true world is just another dream. The coming together of the two opposed art drives is what leads to the lucid dream, becoming aware that one is dreaming, and yet instead of awakening (instead of lapsing into the arrogance of thinking that one is awake) one continues to dream. This notion of the philosopher as lucid dreamer is another one of Nietzsche's descriptions of the philosophers of the future, and one of the characteristics of postmodern thought. Later he will return to this notion of the lucid dream:

The Consciousness of Appearances. Knowing what I know, how wonderful and new, and yet how disturbing and ironic my situation is with respect to the whole of existence! I have *discovered first-hand* that human and animal nature, indeed the whole history and prehistory of feeling within me, continues to love, hate, concoct and conclude—I have suddenly awakened in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness of dreaming, and that I *must* continue to dream lest I perish, just as the sleepwalker must continue to dream lest he slip and fall. What is 'appearance' to me now? Surely not what is in opposition to some essence—what can I attribute to any essence other than the predicates of its appearance! Surely not a dead mask that conceals the face of some unknown variable, and which might well be torn off it! To me, appearance itself is alive and effective, and it goes so far in its self-mockery as to give the impression that it is appearance and will-o'-the-wisp and dance of spirits and nothing more—and that I too among all these dreamers, I the 'knowledge-seeker', also dance my dance, that the knowledge-seeker is a means of prolonging this worldly dance, and is to that extent one of the stewards of life's festival, and that the sublime consistency and consilience of all that we know is perhaps the best means of *preserving* the community of reverie, *preserving* the perfect intelligibility of all the dreamers to one another, and in so doing *preserving the continuity of the dream*. (*The Joyful Science*, §54)

Nietzsche's epistemological position is often referred to as "perspectivism." In opposition to that desire to reveal the 'naked truth,' Nietzsche recommends a more modest position that it is naive

to think that we can ever see the world from a point of view that is not a particular perspective. In this aphorism, this notion of perspectivism is clearly connected with the conception of the philosopher as artist and philosophy as fiction:

Forgive me the joke of this gloomy grimace and trope; for I myself have learned long ago to think differently, to estimate differently with regard to deceiving and being deceived, and I keep in reserve at least a couple of jostles for the blind rage with which the philosophers resist being deceived. Why *not*? It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world. Let at least this much be admitted: there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances; and if, with the virtuous enthusiasm and clumsiness of some philosophers, one wanted to abolish the "apparent world" altogether well suppose you could do that, at least nothing would be left of your "truth" either. Indeed, what forces us at all to suppose that there is an essential opposition of "true" and "false"? Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance different "values," to use the language of painters? Why couldn't the world *that concerns us* be a fiction? (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §34)

When Nietzsche proposes that we might recognize that the world that concern us is only a fiction, he is introducing that "incredulity toward metanarratives" that Lyotard suggests is one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern condition. In another passage he raises the question that perspectivism entails recognizing that the world has limitless or infinite interpretations:

How far the perspective character of existence extends, or whether it even has any other character; whether an existence without interpretation, without 'sense', does not simply become 'nonsense'; on the other hand, whether all existence is not essentially an *interpretive* existence—these questions, as one would expect, cannot be answered even by the most diligent and scrupulously precise analysis and self-examination of the intellect, because the human intellect cannot help seeing itself in its perspectival forms when it attempts such an analysis, and only sees itself in them. We cannot see around our own corner; it is hopeless curiosity to want to know what other forms of intellect and perspective *might* exist [. . .] But I think that nowadays we are at least far from the ludicrous presumption of decreeing from our corner that only perspectives from that corner *are possible*. On the contrary, the world has once more become 'limitless' to us, in so far as we cannot deny the possibility that it *contains limitless interpretations*. (*The Joyous Science*, §374)

What are the consequences for philosophy if one recognizes that there are limitless interpretations of the world, if one recognizes that one's 'truths' are 'fictions', and that the notion of waking up from the dream and discovering the real world, the master metanarrative, is also, nothing but a dream? Two concurrent passages suggest something about Nietzsche's philosophers of the future:

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled for it belongs to their nature to want to remain riddles at some point these philosophers of the future may have a right it might also be a wrong to be called (*at*)tempters (*Versucher*). This name itself is in the end a mere attempt (*Versuch*) and, if you will, a temptation (*Versuchung*). (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §42)

Are these coming philosophers new friends of "truth"? That is probable enough, for all philosophers so far have loved their truths. But they will certainly not be dogmatists. It must offend their pride, also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman—which has so far been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations. "My judgment is *my* judgment": no one else is easily

entitled to it—that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself. . . . (Beyond Good and Evil, §43)

What are the consequences for political philosophy of Nietzsche's perspectivism, of the incredulity toward metanarratives? What Nietzsche might have meant by *great politics* would require a much longer and deeper examination of his writings. This passage, from a fairly early text, and dealing with the issue of war and peace, perhaps offers a suggestion:

The means to real peace. —No government nowadays admits that it maintains an army so as to satisfy occasional thirsts for conquest; the army is supposed to be for defense. That morality which sanctions self-protection is called upon to be its advocate. But that means to reserve morality to oneself and to accuse one's neighbor of immorality, since he has to be thought of as ready for aggression and conquest if our own state is obliged to take thought of means of self-defense; moreover, when our neighbor denies any thirst for aggression just as heatedly as our state does, and protests that he too maintains an army only for reasons of legitimate self-defense, our declaration of why we require an army declares our neighbor a hypocrite and cunning criminal who would be only too happy to pounce upon a harmless and unprepared victim and subdue him without a struggle. This is how all states now confront one another: they presuppose an evil disposition in their neighbor and a benevolent disposition in themselves. This presupposition, however, is a piece of *inhumanity* as bad as, if not worse than, a war would be; indeed, fundamentally it already constitutes an invitation to and cause of wars, because, as aforesaid, it imputes immorality to one's neighbor and thereby seems to provoke hostility and hostile acts on his part.

The doctrine of the army as a means of self-defense must be renounced just as completely as the thirst for conquest. And perhaps there will come a great day on which a nation distinguished for wars and victories and for the highest development of military discipline and thinking, and accustomed to making the heaviest sacrifices on behalf of these things, will cry of its own free will: '*we shall shatter the sword*'—and demolish its entire military machine down to its last foundations. *To disarm while being the best armed*, out of an *elevation* of sensibility—that is the means to real peace, which must always rest on a disposition for peace: whereas the so-called armed peace such as now parades about in every country is a disposition to fractiousness which trusts neither itself nor its neighbor and fails to lay down its arms half out of hatred, half out of fear. Better to perish than to hate and fear, and *twofold better to perish than to make oneself hated and feared*—this must one day become the supreme maxim of every individual state!—As is well known, our liberal representatives of the people lack the time to reflect on the nature of man: otherwise they would know that they labor in vain when they work for a 'gradual reduction of the military burden'. On the contrary, it is only when this kind of distress is at its greatest that the only kind of god that can help here will be closest at hand. The tree of the glory of war can be destroyed only at a single stroke, by a lightning-bolt: lightning, however, as you well know, comes out of a cloud and from on high. (*Human, All Too Human*, II, §284)