

Long Essay Presentation Student Seminar 28.04.95

(i Introduction

The proposed title for my long essay is:

Is Nietzsche's attack on Altruism, Pity, and Sympathy justified?

My talk will proceed in the following way:

Firstly, I will explain how I came to choose this topic; secondly I will discuss the problems which I have encountered so far; thirdly I will elaborate my topic; fourthly I will outline my progress up to the present, and finally I will state my future intentions.

1. My choice of topic

My mutual interests in Literature and Philosophy have led me to investigate the foundations of modern literary theories, in order that I may better understand the origin, content, direction, and influences of these theories. The impression which I have gained is that their reach is far beyond the printed page.

As an aspiring scholar, I wish to gain the skills required to evaluate, judge, and participate in these influences. It is my hope that the study of Nietzsche will provide a fruitful beginning to my journey of investigation. His ideas were elaborated upon by critics of literature, because he provided a model of the human condition, which, if observed, revealed that hitherto covert influences exist that profoundly affect our social norms, our beliefs, our values, our literature, in fact, our whole lives. My study of Nietzsche should enable me to assess the validity of his model, and thereby contribute to my evaluation of his wider influences.

2. Problems so far

The problems which I have encountered fall into two groups, academic and personal. My difficulty in relation to the first of these is the fact that Nietzsche provides a new field of study for me. I do not have an already-developed background of information from which to draw. Whilst this fact makes him a new and exciting challenge, it also implies that I have been obliged to read and consider extensively in order to gain the required insight into his thought to permit selection of an appropriate direction for my enquiry. Nietzsche's scheme, like that of most philosophical thinkers, is extensive and complex. In addition, much of his writing is undertaken in an aphoristic, metaphoric, and poetic style, a factor which at times renders his meaning elusive, disguised, ambiguous, or apparently contradictory. I intend to overcome these obstacles of inadequate knowledge, interpretation and understanding as my relationship with Nietzsche deepens.

The second problem referred to relates to my personal response to some of Nietzsche's philosophical propositions. Many of these, for example his unequivocal advocacy of pluralistic values, intentional stratification of society, and extreme hostility to the practice and aims of Christianity, conflict with hitherto deeply-held personal convictions. My response to this situation has been to set aside any emotional or non-academic reactions to Nietzsche, and to adopt a singularly scholarly approach. I intend to make philosophical and logical judgements of Nietzsche's work, to show approval where appropriate, and to base any criticisms on suitable intellectual criteria.

Above all, I am striving to keep an open mind, coming to conclusions only when I have examined and considered as much available evidence as I am able to collate in the limited time-frame at my disposal.

3. Elaboration of Topic

(i) Nietzsche's background and works:

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Prussia, Saxony in 1844, and died in Weimar in 1900. Whilst his background was German, it appears that during anti-German periods of his life, he claimed to have Polish ancestors. Many of these were in fact members of the clergy, his father also being a Lutheran pastor. Raised amongst such strong Christian influences, it is of little surprise that the young Nietzsche held deep Christian convictions himself. However, they were not to last.

Subsequent to his attendance at a distinguished boarding-school, followed by five years at universities of Bonn and Leipzig and a year's military service, he was appointed as professor of classical philology at Basel university, a post which caused him to become a naturalised Swiss. Nietzsche's rich and diverse background is likely to have influenced his broad and thorough approach to philosophical questions. His early adult life received its main influences from Wagner and Schopenhauer, although he later rejected their thought. Illness led to the abandonment of his academic post after ten years, and it appears that the remainder of his life was haunted with physical and mental suffering. These torments led to the experience of psychotic states, culminating in insanity prior to his death.

Nietzsche's philosophy is presented in his various works written in the twenty or so years from the commencement of his academic appointment. Nearly twenty volumes expound his thought in a variety of rigorous and rhetorical styles.

(ii) Nietzsche's Philosophy:

The focal point of Nietzsche's enquiries is his intense awareness of the human component in philosophical questions. He sees this as a major influence in answers which are yielded to questions posed. A major factor for him also is acknowledgement of a person as a member of particular society. Taking these factors on board implies that there are no impartial standpoints from which issues can be viewed and judged. There are also no universal or absolute viewpoints to which neutral or definitive pronouncements can be attributed. The doctrine of perspectivism is utilised to its full potential by Nietzsche.

Another concern for him is what he sees as an ongoing decline in civilised society. It is a trend which has been in motion since Socrates began the tradition of dialectical discourse. Nietzsche sees such methods of enquiry as decadent and misleading. In The Twilight of the Idols Nietzsche says of Socrates: (quote 1).

From the analysis which he undertakes of the world, Nietzsche draws a number of conclusions. He claims that there is no God, no absolute values or truths, and that our misunderstanding of the world has led us into error and confusion. Existence does not have a beginning, or even an end in time, but continually repeats itself in an eternal cycle of recurring events. He believes that the true philosopher should go beyond mere analysis, a view which prompts him to recommend a new and radical vision for humanity.

In presenting His vision, Nietzsche undertakes to dismantle presently-held value systems, both religious and political. He is particularly vehement in his criticism of Christianity, from The Antichrist, (quote 2). His rancour against existing values leads him to say of Kant, again from The Antichrist, (quote 3). Nietzsche's conviction that God does not exist leads him to conclude that our values and morality, which are, in large, mindful of such a belief, rendered null and void.

Present in the new-world vision advocated by Nietzsche are the presence of many elements hitherto alien to theories of so-called civilised society. Humans fall into two camps, the mediocre, and those with outstanding talent. Nietzsche sees these differences already present, and refers to them variously as the master/slave types, and the herd and leader types. Whilst he has much criticism to level at such a situation, Nietzsche is prepared to retain the distinction in his prescription.

Where he deviates is his open advocacy of the inequality of human beings, and his idea that the herd will operate to support the emergence of a higher type of human, his *Übermensch*, or Superman. Such a being will overcome the transience, instability, cruelty, and uncertainty of this world. He will transform himself and his world by creating new values, pursuing the aesthetic dimension of life to the full. He will be robust and healthy, and will have no time for weakness or sentiment. He will not be diminished with the prospect of a repeated existence, but will learn to embrace the fullness of all experience. His impetus, as with all motivating forces, will come from his Will-to-Power.

(iii) My special interest:

The advocacy of Nietzsche's revised view of life includes the repudiation of many values seen as important, both in religious traditions, and in society at large. He regards them as incompatible with the notion required for the development of the Superman. His particular argument against altruism, pity, and sympathy is the area in which I hope to concentrate. Nietzsche believes that the supposed concept of altruism is held by slaves trapped in a master/slave relationship. It is in fact a lie, and reflects instead, the slaves hidden ambition to take from the master, in order that he, the slave, may become more powerful.

4. My Progress so far

In order to arrive at a starting point from which to examine Nietzsche's philosophy, I have had to undertake a comprehensive introduction to his work. I have read several commentaries and a little of his writings. My knowledge of his ideas is still shaky, and my assumptions about his philosophy as outlined are still uncertain at this point.

5. My future intentions

In order to complete a serious undertaking of writing a critique of Nietzsche's work, it is necessary for me to carefully assess the points which interest me, and ascertain the role which they play in his overall view. I intend to explore the master/slave relationship as outlined by Nietzsche, and investigate where the slave mentality deviates from that of the herd. I wish in particular, to identify his understanding of altruism, sympathy, and pity, and to see if his argument for their absence in a so-called improved society is valid.
