

Do We Need a Revaluation of *Peace* in Light of Nietzsche's Analysis of Nihilism?

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"I do not want to moralize, but to those who do, I give this advice: if you want eventually to deprive the best things and situations of all their worth, then keep talking about them the way you have been!"

--Nietzsche (GS 292)

Nietzsche's critical analysis of morality focuses throughout his writings on the extent to which human beings detach from a sense of creative accountability for the production of their own moral structures. Nietzsche places special emphasis on how modern moral systems appeal to a greater Metaphysical existence to enact the preservation of their inherent relevance in our lives. In particular, Nietzsche critiques Christianity for imposing a moral system that devalues pleasures and categorizes suffering as a negative, thereby degrading the human experience by virtue of over-simplification. What one finds in Nietzsche's critique of morality is not a recipe for a depressed or pessimistic relation to life but rather an affirmation of human experience and living. In essence, Nietzsche is calling for a massive escape from a broken moral framework.

I want to consider where the concept of "peace" might fit in a discussion centered on Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism. It seems from the outset that Nietzsche would be opposed to a concept so heavily saturated with value judgments in its very nature; its very conception would seem dependent on an irrelevant (or decaying) moral coding. On the other hand, what potential might we find lurking in a "re-valuation" of the concept of peace? Can it serve as the basis for a new moral foundation? In order to answer this question it is necessary to delve deeper into Nietzsche's critical analysis of traditional approaches to defending morality.

Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism is an attempt to explain what he outlines as a

devaluation of moral values dependent upon metaphysical fundamentalism; that is to say, a devaluation of a moral system based on ultimate truths which transcend any social human values (and he furthers this claim by suggesting that the true insight is not that we recognize the lack of transcendent values but is instead the realization that though we *claim to be free* of fundamental truths we still cling to their value structure). What we recognize through reading Nietzsche is not just that there are no fundamental truths but that there is a liberation that can arise from this realization. This liberation reflects an affirmation of life as it is lived, without reference to divine meaning but reconciled instead to the scope and value of human meaning.

At the beginning of his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche imbeds the historical development of morality within a larger power structure developed and maintained by those at the top of the social hierarchy. "It was 'the good' themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, and high-stationed and high minded, who [initially] felt and established themselves and their actions as good" (GM 1-2). By designating concepts like goodness to correspond with their own deeds the 'high-stationed' were in essence guaranteeing their own places atop the social hierarchy. In this description of the roots of morality, the powerful individuals of a society are deemed responsible for defining goodness in terms that best fit their needs, but not for actually having knowledge of a fundamental moral structure (though this was claimed by those possessing a sense of 'divine right'). They

then imposed on everyone else the value judgments to which they were predisposed, without allowing for differing definitions to take hold. In fact, most anything contradictory to the ethical priorities set forth by the noble classes became classified as 'base'. Nietzsche is essentially suggesting that the origins of morality developed relatively arbitrarily, and not for the 'greater good' of people but for the benefit of individuals in privileged positions of power. The arbitrary quality of this "noble" morality is not one of complete non-meaning; it is arbitrary only because the meaning and purpose are not derived from fundamental grounds. A similar arbitrary element is established when the "slave" mentality overcomes the "noble" moral domination to turn the noble moral priorities on their head. At this point, the more familiar distinction between "good" and "evil" enters the discussion, and belief in the Christian God as a basis for moral practice establishes an increasingly dominant role in modern society.

Nietzsche's narrative in *The Gay Science* concerning the "madman" in the marketplace offers insight into the role of Christianity in Nietzsche's moral genealogy. In the madman parable, Nietzsche comments on the problematic nature of a Christian moral system that has lost its relevance. "God is dead," the madman proclaims, and

"we have killed him -- you and I! We are all his murderers... Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?" (GS 125)

Not only this, but

"whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!" (GS 125).

In this passage, the madman's proclamation that men must become gods just to be worthy of the death of God is a statement about a creative capacity invested in humans. We are consigned to the project of developing an ethical system, along with the 'higher history'

to which all future generations will belong, precisely and only because we are left with the task of re-valuation. Upon making this claim the 'madman' realizes that he has come too early, because though people claim to no longer believe in God, in fact,

this tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men... This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars- and yet they have done it themselves! (GS 125)

The claim here is that while we may no longer profess a secure belief in God like we did in the past, there is still a lingering attachment to old Christian ideals and values based on this traditional belief structure.

Through his critique of Christian morality, Nietzsche demarcates aspects of the human experience that have been regimented to categories of good vs evil, effectively limiting the dynamic quality of human experience. "The Christian decision to find the world ugly and bad has *made* the world ugly and bad" (GS 130). The Christian ideology delimits the human relation to the world so that experience in the world (happiness and suffering and everything in between) is understood from a linear perspective. This does not mean Nietzsche is suggesting one gives up because there is a lack of fundamental meaning or purpose; rather, one embraces what is real to oneself instead of falling mind numbingly in line with the dogmatic ramblings of a prophet or god (idol). From this vantage point, it seems we are hard pressed to find a relation to peace devoid of the problematic aspects of valuation Nietzsche is trying to escape.

How then can we talk about peace? In light of Nietzsche's critique of traditional moral valuations, it would seem that our colloquial understanding of the word 'peace' is all too easily framed in reference to the very values we have yet to overcome (but which, on Nietzsche's view, *need* to be overcome). On this view, our understanding of peace as a wholly 'good' practice or ideal

flows from values that have become stagnant and non-valuable.

Italian poet/philosopher Lanzo del Vasto traces the word 'peace' to the same roots as 'pact' and 'pay', suggesting that it is a type of compact or agreement between individuals. This is a helpful definition because it situates the word in a realm that is completely human. That is to say, his notion of peace does not rely on a juxtaposed belief in metaphysical entities (divinity). Instead, on his view, peace represents something like a trust between humans, or a human law agreed to and established with the utmost primacy. But something distinguishes 'peace' from 'law' in del Vasto's analysis, namely, the stipulations in the compact of peace, which ultimately establish a commitment or promise to act in accord with principles of nonviolence.

In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses the possibilities and problems concerning the making of promises:

Man himself must first of all have become calculable, regular, necessary, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for his own future, which is what one who promises does (GM 2-1).

Nietzsche contends that we must have full control over our own future or be able to handle any accident that may befall us if we are truly to promise anything; otherwise the value of the promise is forever in question. While the remainder of Nietzsche's analysis in GM has to do primarily with conscience and guilt, I believe that Nietzsche makes an important statement here concerning the pitfalls of a seemingly benign form of absolutism. What I mean here is that when Nietzsche sets out the premise for what could be considered a 'true' promise, he credits the human being's capacity for making a promise with the untested assumption that we are capable of absolutely knowing that we should be able to *keep* that promise.

From Nietzsche we get the sense there is no way peace can be guaranteed by a compact

or common agreement. In fact, Nietzsche's critique of conscience and promises suggests just this: we cannot know our future or be so prepared for any possible outcome to be certain of the merit, much less the honor, of fulfilling our promise. It may seem trivial to obsess over Nietzsche's point about what is entailed by our ability to make a promise, but without this development, our single best definition of peace as neither a metaphysical nor foundational concept is all too easily dismissed. To see this point more clearly, it might be beneficial to understand the constituent element of peace we call nonviolence.

Gene Sharp identifies several methods of nonviolence: protest and persuasion, social noncooperation, economic noncooperation, political noncooperation and nonviolent intervention. Initially, at least, these practices provoke an interesting irony concerning their very nature; that is, in contrast to what is being protested by choosing acts of nonviolence (violence), acts of nonviolence seem to be rather violent. From a shallow perspective it would appear that forcing a 2nd party to comply with another's demands is an act of violent aggression, in itself. What sets the two apart is not the persuasive characteristic but rather the value of the human being in respect to practices of violence vs. nonviolence. In essence, nonviolence signals nonviolent treatment of humans, not necessarily nonviolent reaction to a situation as a whole. The Sharp doctrines of nonviolence dictate not only methods for social change but also that a life lost is more valuable than a life taken. On this view, the most blatant way one can cause change is not to kill all those who oppose you, but to be destroyed and have your martyrdom reach those who are left in your wake.

Nonviolence as a response to Nietzsche's claim regarding our ability to make a promise poses an interesting challenge. If individuals can sustain a commitment (as people have) to

enduring a life of non-harm toward others, then essentially they have been able to make and keep a promise. From this perspective, it would seem that the compact of peace can be upheld by honoring a promise of nonviolent action. This might suggest that we can carry on without a revalued sense of peace.

There are still some pressing questions to answer in considering the topic of peace. The questions emerge in regard to the well known activists Gandhi, King, Day, Tolstoy, etc. What roles do their philosophies of peace play in relation to nihilism and revalued peace?

In *the Doctrine of the Sword*, Gandhi touches on the question of the extent to which nonviolence runs up against its own limit. In this essay Gandhi makes the claim that though nonviolence is the more noble action, the control it has on ones actions extends only up to the point where ones life is endangered, at which point it becomes just, moral, and righteous to protect oneself violently. This is exactly the kind of hypocrisy Nietzsche speaks of in his passage on the ability to make a promise. What this caveat allows for is a devaluation of the very value one is trying to develop or reshape. From the stance of a peace activist, it does not hold true to the ideal set forth, and actually represents a new form of meekness that undercuts the desired transformation to new values.

Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. were avid and dedicated practitioners of peace and nonviolence. Yet justification of their methods included explicit grounding in Christian moral beliefs and structures. While this hardly discredits the views of these well-known pioneers of peace activism -- each being a heroic proponent of peace in their own way -- their methods did not accord with the vision of a revaluation of our notion of peace implicit in Nietzsche's writings.

In my closing comments, I would like to draw on one more case study: Colman

McCarthy was a journalist for the *Washington Post* from 1969-1997. In 1982 his life took a dramatic turn. While giving a talk on writing at his children's high school he mentioned to the host teacher how much he enjoyed the experience and that he'd like to come back and do it again. When the teacher challenged him to come back the next semester and teach a course on writing, Colman suggested that he would "rather teach peace." School Without Walls in the D.C. area is a school committed to experimental education and, as it turns out, it became an ideal place for McCarthy to begin what would become for him an enduring experiment in peace education. McCarthy taught the class once a week on a volunteer basis and made the time available by not taking a lunch break at work. McCarthy, with no formal schooling or training (in education), saw fit to experiment with peace education and literature under largely unhindered circumstances (reading Gandhi, King, Day, Tolstoy and the like). After three years he trained college students to take over at the School Without Walls, and he proceeded to introduce similar courses in non-violence to other schools, and worked to establish the Center for Teaching Peace. Since then, McCarthy has taken his model curriculum to law schools and universities, high schools and juvenile detention centers, teaching courses on non-violence and peace. To this day, he continues this practice, and is now in his early seventies. McCarthy has been criticized for presenting a biased approach to education, as his classroom is always 'pro-peace'. McCarthy responds to this claim by pointing out that while it is true that he cannot in good conscience "teach" violence, clearly the students who come into his classes are "already well educated, often overeducated, in the ethic of violence." Indeed, if we look carefully enough, we'll see that these "students have already been saturated with it" (McCarthy XV). What McCarthy offers in response to this situation

is the chance for any student to be critical about what *is* being taught in his class. He often talks about how he relishes the students he has who find his teaching suspect, and he encourages open discussion and debate between his students and himself on the texts he brings to the class, as well as on other relevant issues.

McCarthy's approach is subject to the old values of peace at their fruition. Peace methodologies developed separately from an awareness of the emerging impact of nihilism typically reflect a dogmatic belief in peace. This approach to "teaching peace" through a celebration of peace and nonviolent practices (not as outlined in my attempt to resonate with nihilism but instead as subject to the old values in decline) is quite likely to train individuals to be part of a new "peace" herd. While not a herd of destruction or greed, it is likely to be mesmerized by the shepherds who possess and distribute conformist ideologies.

What we are left with is a sense that the concept of "peace" as it has been historically constructed is fundamentally not in tune with Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism. "Peace" in this sense appears "just" only in relation to a transcendent value structure that has been

idealized beyond a physical human world experience, and this entire concept is one that needs to be left behind.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes, "If you have your 'why?' in life, you can get along with almost any 'how?'" (TI 12).

According to Nietzsche, people have been searching for a means to explain their 'reason' for existence since the beginning. Perhaps it is not possible to escape our old broken values; perhaps revaluation as Nietzsche describes it will not or cannot happen; but if this is the case, then certainly dogmatized belief in peace is *better for the herd* than a belief in violence. Perhaps it is also the case that, in an effort to abandon the old value structure, we are left with a void from which it is hard to escape (precisely because we can still feel what it was like to have something like a value structure). In this case, perhaps a "revaluation" of "peace" also has a place in the discourse; stripped of its transcendence and divine meaning, existing provisionally and simply as a compact between humans. Slowly, as our history progresses, perhaps we can begin to let go of the old value structure, until a word or concept "peace" is no longer necessary.*

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