

Sin after the Death of God: A Culture Transformed?

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Introduction

In recent years Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* has been getting increasing attention in Anglo-American Nietzsche literature. Scholars such as Christopher Janaway, David Owen, Aaron Ridley and Lawrence Hatab have dedicated books to the work, and Brian Leiter's research on Nietzsche's moral philosophy draws heavily on the *Genealogy*.¹ However, there are important, if not essential, elements of the *Genealogy* that remain underexamined in contemporary scholarship. Today I will talk about one of these undervalued elements: namely Nietzsche's discussion of sin. I will argue that if we take his account of sin seriously, we find not only part of his critique of Christianity, but also a problematization of the separation of cultural and religious elements in a culture or society.

The second and third essay of the *Genealogy* are of particular importance to this project – in the second Nietzsche sets up his account of the origin of sin, and in the third essay this account is deepened by Nietzsche's analysis of the ascetic priest's role in the promotion of sin. In this paper I will first explicate Nietzsche's account of sin in the *Genealogy*, with a particular focus not on the historical narrative offered in the Second Essay but on the use and explanatory narratives of sin offered by the ascetic priest. I will also look in detail at Nietzsche's account of sin *after* the death of God, and in particular the relation between the Christian God and sin. I will then argue that Nietzsche's analysis of sin shows us that drawing

¹ See Hatab, L.J., 2008, *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Janaway, C., 2007, *Beyond Selflessness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Ridley, A., 1998, *Nietzsche's Conscience* (New York: Cornell University Press), Owen, D., 2007, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality* (Stockfield, UK: Acumen Press), Leiter, B., 2002, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge).

a clear demarcation between cultural and religious elements of society is not as straightforward as is sometimes assumed in for example, mainstream discussions of secularism.

Nietzsche's account of sin

The desire for an explanation of suffering, which Schopenhauer refers to as the metaphysical need, takes a particular form in the third essay of the *Genealogy*; Nietzsche writes “for every suffering man instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering: more precisely a doer, more definitely a *guilty* doer [...]” (GM 3:15).² There is a desire to know the reason for one’s suffering in order to find some relief from this suffering, and more specifically this is a desire to find the *cause*, to find someone or something that one can blame this suffering on – only this will bring relief. As opposed to merely desiring an explanation for suffering, the person desires *someone* to blame outside of herself.

This desire is met by the explanations offered by the ascetic priest. This figure, who takes centre stage in the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*, appears as someone who can in fact point towards the ‘guilty doer’. As Nietzsche writes in section 20;

Man, suffering from himself in some way [...], uncertain as to why and wherefore, desiring reason – [...] and behold! he receives a hint [...] from the ascetic priest, the first hint as to the ‘cause’ of his suffering: he is to seek it in *himself*, in some *guilt*, in a piece of the past, he should understand his suffering itself as a *state of punishment*. [...] (GM 3:20).

We can see here that the guilty party the priest points to is not external to the person that is suffering. Instead, the ascetic priest “changes the direction” by telling the suffering person that she herself is to blame. This is an absolutely essential point in Nietzsche’s discussion of the ascetic priest. Instead of being able to point blame outwards, the ascetic priest convinces people to turn it inwards, to find themselves guilty. By doing this, the ascetic priest offers a meaning to the suffering; he explains why people are suffering, he brings suffering “under the

² All quotations from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* are from the following edition; Nietzsche, F., 1998, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Smith, D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

perspective of *guilt*” (GM 3:28). It is our fault that we suffer and we should understand it as a punishment.

This explanation of suffering by pointing towards guilt is one in which human beings are sinful and unredeemable, and the only relief we may ever find will be in another world. The purpose and meaning that follow from these ideas are not aimed at our world, they involve a “hatred of the human” and result in “an aversion to life” (GM3:28). The story the ascetic priest tells us is not only that we are to blame for suffering – but it also places the only hope of a better life, of a life without suffering *after* this life. The positing of an afterlife like that of the kingdom of heaven helps those who are suffering to deal with their current state, because they are given the vision and hope of a world *without* suffering. But that world is not the world in which they live now, which explains why an “aversion to life” now occurs and why they will ‘nothingness’ in this world. This is what Nietzsche calls the will to nothingness.

People want to accept the priests’ explanation for suffering, because finding yourself guilty and sinful is better than not having an explanation for suffering. Nietzsche thinks that this also illustrates what he calls the ‘will to find oneself guilty’. For example, he talks about the human “will to misunderstand suffering, its reinterpretation into feelings of guilt”. We desire an explanation of suffering over anything else, and considering yourself as inherently sinful is still preferable to not having an explanation of suffering. We will to misunderstand suffering as long as this misunderstanding provides us with some peace of mind, that it has other suffering as its consequence is not a problem; this is the suffering that we desire, the suffering that we *will*.

We can see this idea expressed quite forcefully in section 22 of the Second Essay of the *Genealogy*. It is also in this section that we can begin to see the importance of God with

relation to the interpretation of suffering and sin the ascetic priest offers. Nietzsche writes that;

“In ‘God’ he seizes upon the ultimate antithesis he can find to his real and irredeemable animal instincts, he reinterprets these self-same animal instincts as debt/guilt before God [...]. We have here a sort of madness of the will showing itself in mental cruelty which is absolutely unparalleled: man’s *will* to find himself guilty and condemned without hope of reprieve [...]”.

This passage gives us a glimpse of the importance of the ideal of God in relation to guilt – God functions here as “the ultimate antithesis” to our instincts, and we then feel a *Schuld* towards God. So what does Nietzsche mean when he talks about God? Nietzsche’s God-concept is not one where we can point at several attributes and add them altogether to make an accurate representation of God. Instead, he seems primarily concerned with the way that people relate themselves to God. When he importantly describes God as “the uttermost example of godliness so far realized on earth” this does not mean that the Christian God meets certain objective standards of what a God is and happens to just tick all the boxes. What is important, instead, is that people consider God to be the uttermost example of godliness in comparison to themselves. In some of Nietzsche’s work there does seem to be an attempt to capture God; in *Human, All-Too-Human*, for example, he focuses on God as being non-egoistic, something that he says it is impossible for people to be yet is upheld as an ideal. We want to be non-egoistic yet are incapable of being so – with the addition of a God who is actually only capable of non-egoistic actions, this failure is felt even more strongly. However, in later works concerning this relation between God and humans Nietzsche does not focus on specific aspects of God other than ‘perfection’. The question of course remains as to what this perfection refers to, but it is not the specific attributes that make this God so important, but the kind of perceived relation between God and humans.

In *Human, All-Too-Human* 132 Nietzsche writes that people compare themselves “with a being who is said to be capable only of those actions which are called un-egoistic, and to live

in the perpetual consciousness of an unselfish mode of thought” and that it is because people gaze “into this clear mirror that [their] image appears to [them] so dark, so unusually warped” (HH 132).³ What we can take from this is that our reflections would not look so warped if there were not this God to compare ourselves to, if there was not this ideal in place that we know we will always fall short of. We can see that in Nietzsche’s story the kind of God-concept one has effects people’s own self-image: the more perfect a God is perceived to be, the less perfect humans will seem.

In the *Genealogy* Nietzsche writes that “the sense of guilt towards the divinity has continued to grow for several thousands of years, and always in the same proportion as the concept and sense of god has grown and risen into the heights” (GM2:20). There is a very important relation for Nietzsche between how people view themselves, and in this context how corrupted, guilty or sinful people feel themselves to be, and the kind of God they uphold. Not only do we fall short in any attempt to live up to this ideal of God, but this same conception of God’s nature allows sin and guilt, and a sense of indebtedness towards God to grow tremendously. We can see this especially in the narrative of the crucifixion. The narratives and imagery of Christianity, as well as the work of the ascetic priests, can be explained as being used to increase our feelings of indebtedness, our feelings of sin.

Sin after the death of God

If we understand sin to have grown because of the priest’s explanation for suffering, then it should have become apparent that this is heavily reliant on a certain concept of God. It would therefore not be strange to think that once this specific notion of God is no longer important to most people – that is, when God is dead - that sin would thereby disappear. This is however

³ All quotations from *Human All-Too-Human* and *The Wanderer and His Shadow* are taken from the following edition; Nietzsche, F., 2006, *Human, All-Too-Human*, trans. Zimmern, H., and Cohn, P.V. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications).

not what Nietzsche tells us. Even though sin as it exists could not have become what it is without a certain notion of God, this does not mean that it can no longer exist *without* this notion of God. What was necessary for its origin may not be necessary for its continuation. We can see this thought in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, where Nietzsche writes that “[...]it was Christianity which first brought sin into the world. Belief in the cure which it offered has now been shaken to its deepest roots: but belief in the sickness which it taught and propagated continues to exist” (WS: 78).

In sections 20 and 21 of the *Genealogy* we can find the same thought. In section 20 Nietzsche writes that "the prospect that the complete and definitive victory of atheism might redeem mankind entirely from this feeling of indebtedness towards its origins, its *causa prima*, cannot be dismissed" (GM2:20). This passage indicates a hesitation on Nietzsche's part: can sin, or "this feeling of indebtedness towards [...] origins" be removed once God is out of the picture? However, he answers this question in section 21 where he tells us the following;

[...] at the end of the previous paragraph [I] even talked [...] as if these concepts were from now on necessarily approaching their end, now that their pre-condition, the belief in our ‘creditor’, in God, has collapsed. The real situation is fearfully different. The moralization of the concepts guilt and duty, their being pushed back into *bad* conscience, actually represents an attempt to *reverse* the direction of the development just described, or at least to halt its movement. The *goal* now is the pessimistic one of closing off once and for all the prospect of a definitive repayment [...]. (GM2:21).

We see here that Nietzsche's hesitation has turned into an outright rejection of the thesis that sin might not continue to exist after the death of God. Nietzsche suggests in this passage that the moralization of guilt has resulted not in the demise of guilt, but in guilt turning back against the debtor – now that the creditor, God, is out of the picture. This turning against the debtor leads to an “irredeemability of guilt” an impossibility of redemption, of repayment. (GM2:21).

This impossibility of redemption appears, because even though sin remains, we are no longer able to rely on the redemptive or explanatory narratives that Christianity offered us. The thought is that the ‘metaphysical need’ for explanations for suffering does not go away with the death of God (even though I think for Nietzsche this might be the eventual goal). In fact, it is made all the more strong because suddenly we cannot appeal to the figure of God and the idea of an afterlife anymore. We are stuck with a feeling of indebtedness towards the world (a remnant of the Christian narrative) and also a feeling of indebtedness towards God who we have killed. And as a consequence of our murdering God, we can no longer have any hope of redemption.

Nietzsche takes this very seriously – he argues that our culture, and perhaps even our psychological instincts have changed since Christianity, and in particular since the ascetic priest’s use of moralized guilt and sin. We can see this, for example, when contrasting it with Nietzsche’s writings on ancient Greek culture. In that culture, Nietzsche says, bad conscience was kept at bay by the gods – because it was the gods that took on guilt. In Christian culture, guilt is taken on by humans – and Nietzsche tells us that this remains the case even when God is dead. This is perhaps one of the shadows he tells us about in *The Gay Science*, one of the shadows that linger even though God is no longer in the picture. This is why Nietzsche would not want to say, and I think he is right in this, that sin is no longer *religious*. It is so problematic for Nietzsche precisely because it is religious yet its grounding has disappeared.

Conclusion

If we take Nietzsche’s analysis of sin after the death of God seriously, then definitions of secularism that focus special attention on belief in God or a self-identification of someone as being religious seem to fall short. There is the possibility that there are elements in our society or culture that are ‘religious’ in some significant way without involving a belief in God. Of

course, one could argue that sin without God is no longer religious sin, or Christian sin, but I do not think that is convincing. Even without God sin is importantly Christian in the sense that the loss of God is immanently and importantly felt and experienced as a problem. It seems to preclude any possibility of redemption, precisely because it is both religious and does no longer involve God.

This strikes me as a very important sense in which religion is felt and experienced, even if (or especially?) when belief in God has decreased. Nietzsche helps us conceptualize this experience, and shows us that when we want to analyse our culture, our experiences within this culture and its religious elements, there is much more to consider than belief in God or a self-identification as religious. By taking sin as an example we can see that there is a way in which people or culture has transformed since the emergence of Christianity. This change does not mean that ideas such as sin should no longer be considered religious, but religious ideals that have been taken up can still play a large part in our culture even when explicit belief in God or the self-identification of people as religious has significantly reduced.

And these elements or psychological instincts can still only be understood with reference to religion, and Christianity in particular. This is why Nietzsche's potential solution, the re-evaluation of all values, requires a radical change. Even if God is dead our thinking (perhaps even our psychological constitutions) is not only historically Christian but presently so. Nietzsche hereby helps us understand contemporary 'secularized' (Western European) culture in a rich way that does justice to the complexities of the interplay between religion and culture.

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