

Beyond Nihilism: An Account of Nietzsche and the Power of Creativity

Nietzsche's Shadow

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is perhaps the single most misunderstood philosopher of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Most known for his aphorism, "God is dead," it is often overlooked that Nietzsche was a proponent of joy, art, and creation. His understanding of the nature of truths and values was profound, diverging from the thinkers before him who were both proponents and seekers of truth, meaning, and virtue. One particular word that has cast its shadow on Nietzsche's work is *nihilism*. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines nihilism as, "a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless."

This paper will explore the question of whether or not Nietzsche's thought is nihilistic. This will be done through an examination of three of Nietzsche's works: The Birth of Tragedy, Beyond Good and Evil, and Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A closer reading of these works and their underlying concepts will demonstrate that Nietzsche's thought was not nihilistic as it is typically defined, but rather seeks to affirm life, meaning, and values through the power of creativity, despite the inevitable suffering that is inseparable from existence. If the definition of nihilism only captures the uprooting of traditional values, then Nietzsche may very well be a nihilist. However, it is clear that Nietzsche's thoughts escape this gross oversimplification.

A Dissection of the Definition

To undertake this mammoth task, it is first necessary to dissect this particular definition of nihilism so as to avoid any confusion with its popular misinterpretations. The first portion of this definition reads, "a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded." Nietzsche is

not a subscriber nor a fan of traditional values. However, this disdain for traditional values merely co-occurs with his primary concern. It is not traditional values in themselves that arouse true discontentment, but rather the attempt to crystallize them, which castrates the creative processes that brings life value (this creative process and its valence are reminiscent of the Dionysian force that Nietzsche is fond of. This will be explored later in the paper). Nietzsche parallels this sentiment in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. During the Ass Festival, Zarathustra is at first angered by his disciples' quickness to embrace piety again and worship an animal, a lowly ass of all things. However, Zarathustra comes to understand and affirm their act of creation- the creation of new values.

Furthermore, the use of the words *unfounded* and *belief* implies an epistemological aspect of this definition of nihilism. Through this linkage, one can appropriately examine the integrity and ontological merit of both values (and subsequent evaluations of what is good or bad) and knowledge (which may be referred to as truths). Truths and values seem to be inextricably linked, and both were of interest to Nietzsche.

The second section of this definition states that "existence is senseless and useless." It is clear that the criteria for nihilism is twofold: one must believe that 1. *Traditional beliefs and values are unfounded*, and 2. *existence is senseless and useless*. This recapitulation, while redundant, is of utmost importance in this evaluation, for Nietzsche's thought must satisfy both of these criteria to truly be called nihilistic.

The Birth of Tragedy

To better understand Nietzsche's thought, it is necessary to examine his first work, The Birth of Tragedy. While this book may have been overambitious and at times heavy handed, it

will provide valuable insight into Nietzsche's beliefs about the importance of art and creation as well as its relation to truth and value. This book introduces two figures of Greek mythology: Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo represents individuation and formation while Dionysus represents deindividuation and deformation (or dismembering). According to Nietzsche, the Greek art of tragedy was an affirmation of a cruel and absurd life. Music, specifically the dithyramb (a cacophonous, bacchanalian style song) displayed the overflowing passion, energy, and disorder associated with Dionysus. Nietzsche believed that the art of tragedy had become watered down (Nietzsche ascribes this to Euripides), and Greek society lost its way by overemphasizing order and formation. To Nietzsche, an attempt to logicize life is to deny life itself. In the same way, trying to logicize knowledge and values is to deny their fluid essence. To stagnate life via these Apollonian formations is to suppress the Dionysian, forcing it to turn inward towards itself and resulting in chaos (as evidenced in devastation that King Pentheus suffered).

One profound passage of the book describes King Midas's encounter with Silenus, a follower of Dionysus, where he asks about the meaning of life itself. In King Midas's quest to understand the meaning of life, one may argue that he also seeks the knowledge of transcendental values. As Silenus answers in the negative, stating that it is better to be nothing, he also refutes transcendental values. Like humanity, it is better that they never exist. Put simply, the refutation of the significance of life comes with the refutation of transcendental values.

The birth of tragedy as an art form was crucial to Nietzsche, because it represented a moment in history where a group of people affirmed life's pain and suffering, understood its lack of τέλος (often associated with traditional values), and nonetheless found value in process of creating an art filled with strong pessimism. One need not seek comfort or meaning in studying

constellations, measurements, or elements; these are merely activities that in excess neglect the Dionysian aspect of life and its necessary deindividuation. What is often overlooked is the bliss of deindividuation and the dissolution of the self through cathartic and euphoric art.

Will to Power

Like much of Nietzsche's work, the concept of will to power is grossly misunderstood. Confined to dualistic moral schemas, many people assume that it is an egregious reversal of morality. However, Nietzsche believes that "Life simply *is* will to power" [BGE, 203]. The will to power is an urge to *be* that is indifferent to good and evil and indifferent to judgement. Contrary to predecessors such as Kierkegaard and Hegel, teleology is simply not a part of the equation. An urge to *be* does not imply any sense of direction or prescription. According to Nietzsche:

Life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation- but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages? [BGE, 203].

The seemingly callous words operate contrary to many traditional understandings of life. However, Nietzsche's goal is to challenge these understandings so that they do not prevent the full affirmation and experience of life. The force of life, the will to power is found in all living things. It is blind, has no identity, no standards, nor any moral nature. This is what humanity and the flowers of the field have in common; the will to power permeates all existence equally. Nietzsche's character Zarathustra takes note of this and shares, "Where I found a living creature, there I found a will to power..." [TSZ, 137]. With this understanding of Nietzsche's idea, one can assert that will to power satisfies the first condition for nihilism as it is understood in this

paper. While it is still tempting to frame the will to power as repugnant, Hobbesian, and depressing, the urge of life is abundant in beauty. In the words of Zarathustra:

Life wants to raise itself on high with pillars and steps; it wants to gaze into the far distance and out upon joyful splendour- *that* is why it needs height! And because it needs height, it needs steps and conflict between steps and those who climb them! Life wants to climb and in climbing overcome itself [TSZ, 125].

In the urge to be, “life must overcome itself again and again!” [TSZ, 125]. Not only does life overcome itself, but it *has* to overcome itself (this will be discussed with eternal return).

Contrary to intuition, the will to power is also related to the figures of Apollo and Dionysus in many ways. In The Birth of Tragedy, these two forces appear abstract and merely artistic. However, Apollonian and Dionysian forces also have ontological implications; in the will to power (or the will to life), these two forces are made manifest by physical urges and bodily forces. The will to power is both deconstructive in the essence of Dionysus and constructive like Apollo. Where a lacuna might have formed by the dethroning of metaphysics, an affirmation of physical and artistic life through the will to power fills the gap.

It is clear that the concept of will to power holds a critique of traditional values. In regards to the second criteria, there is no direct evidence that will to power assumes a senselessness or uselessness of life. It is imperative to make a distinction here; the absence of τέλος does not necessarily mean that life is senseless or useless, simply that there is no directional valence with which to exert life. Life simply exerts *itself*. The beauty and sheer force of life, according to Nietzsche, is *beyond good and evil* (as suggested by his work of the same name).

Truth

Truths can be dangerous. Furthermore, a *will to truth*, according to Nietzsche, cannot even be trusted. This will set an individual on the wrong path, and in the pursuit of truth one may run the risk of being a member of *the herd*. Nietzsche demonstrates outrage at the scores of metaphysicians such as Kant who, according to him, have aided in “[contriving] to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy an almost inconceivable freedom” [BGE, 35]. Nietzsche urges individuals to discard metaphysics altogether since in their operation they disengage people and prevent them from living authentically. An affirmation of the metaphysical is to reject life in its very moment, and to ascribe the meaning of life to something outside of it seems fallacious. Nietzsche himself says, “O *sancta simplicitas!* [O *holy simplicity!*] In what strange simplification and falsification man lives!” [BGE, 35]. One may ask, “what does this have to do with truth?” To him, this strange “simplification” and “falsification” describes the tactics metaphysicians like Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant deploy in order to make sense of the world.

Nietzsche’s genealogical account of morals that is developed through many of his books also provides one of the most profound insights on the concept of truth. Truths may initially be perceived as ahistorical artifacts that can lie buried beneath cultural and societal trends, but Nietzsche presents truths as kaleidoscopic products shaped by various forces. Put more simply, truths are not the opposite, but a refinement of ignorance. Nietzsche wants to hold truth in question and find the “truth” behind truth and its formations. A questioning of truth and values hold the implicit question, “why is truth good and not untruth? A still and transcendental truth is both boring and truths, like values, are narrative and dynamic creatures. To grapple with the genealogical nature of truth and value creation is to understand them in their completeness. One may study a fruit, but studying the tree that produces it can provide far more valuable insights,

for these fruits called “truth” and “value” are descendants of a long and tedious process with flowing energies, formations, and exertions of life. While seemingly scientific in nature, this process is also aesthetic and artistic.

In Birth of Tragedy, it is made clear that knowledge is an artistic construction, and truths too are constructed. In clinging to truths, one rejects life. One may argue that Nietzsche’s conception of truths and their formations is indeed senseless; if they can be arbitrarily created, then how could they have sense? This notion, and the word *arbitrary* are misleading. Truths are not merely created by the spinning of a wheel, but truths occur as formations in the wake of creation, exertions of power, and an urge to be that is in many ways inexplicable. In this regard, there is also an inseparable coupling of truth and power. When one has access to the truth, they may appear to have power, but when one is a *creator* of truths, a joyous liberation from dogmatic captivity can be achieved. Even if Nietzsche’s notion of truth creation truly was senseless, to claim that it is useless (referring to the operating definition of nihilism) would not only be misleading, but wrong. The intrinsic value of truth formation as well as its instrumental benefits via transformation and transvaluation make it evident that truths are not useless. If anything, Nietzsche would argue that the archaic husks of truth that are worshipped are useless, and the shedding of these truths is where life can continue to be affirmed. Much like art, there is a power and aesthetic joy in creating truths.

Zarathustra

Thus Spoke Zarathustra was Nietzsche’s self proclaimed magnum opus and arguably his most personal work. The book is an account of Zarathustra’s self overcoming and throughout its various sections, it becomes clear that Zarathustra is a work in progress. Again, Zarathustra

himself, like a value or truth, is not a fixed entity, and he undergoes various transformations and changes in sensibility as the book progresses. Zarathustra's self overcoming lies in his attunement and inclinations toward the movement of his will, unrestrained by normative forces. Zarathustra experiences these changes not entirely based on his own agency, but partly as a result of the lineages, or "anonymous agencies" (this term was originated by Charles Scott) of prior truths and values which are genealogical in nature.

Another concept that may shed light on whether Zarathustra as a figure is nihilistic or not is the *Übermensch*, or *Overman*. The *Übermensch* is the heart of the gospel that Zarathustra preaches, and it is made clear throughout the book that, man is not an end but a bridge, a bridge to the *Übermensch*. In this regard, humankind, truth, and values all have one thing in common: that they must self-overcome. According to Zarathustra, "the world revolves about the inventor of new values" [TSZ, 78]. In this creation of new values, there simply isn't room for the kingdoms of what is considered old and good. The pillars and structures of old truths and values must crumble and turn into graves, because "only where there are graves are there resurrections" [TSZ, 136].

Zarathustra preaches and lives the message of overcoming that Nietzsche so emphatically wants his audience to receive. Again, the character of Zarathustra is a personification of the will to power, the and the creation of truth and value. To those who would call Zarathustra *only* a destroyer of values, one need only read and discover his true thoughts when he says, "Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's easement" [TSZ, 111]. As explained in the prior evaluations, Zarathustra as created by Nietzsche is not nihilistic, and perhaps far from it.

Beyond Good and Evil, Beyond Nihilism

Nietzsche champions the tirade against the clinging to of norms and strives to dismantle the arbitrary infrastructures of truth and value, for after a time, these infrastructures merely prevent the process of life affirming creation from occurring. Upon further examination of his conception of will to power, truth, and his character, Zarathustra, it is clear that Nietzsche works serve to smash the “tables of values” that dictate the way people live [TSZ, 51]. Nietzsche constantly affirms the creation of new values as well as the value of creation itself. This seems antithetical to popular conceptions of nihilism which seem deprived of any sense of joy, but life and creation transcend meaning itself. Birth is beyond truth and falsity, and dying creations become stable truths. Even Nietzsche’s own work does not escape this inevitable solidification and decay that follows joyous creation. To his thoughts in Beyond Good and Evil he writes:

Not long ago you [thoughts] were so variegated, young and malicious, so full of thorns and secret spices, that you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already doffed your novelty, and some of you, I fear, are ready to become truths...[BGE, 236].

Dying and deformation merely leads to more creation and newness, as demonstrated between the cycle of Apollonian formation and Dionysian deformation. From the aforementioned analyses, it is clear that Nietzsche does not tidily fit the dictionary definition of nihilism. Nietzsche’s thoughts are destructive and creative, beyond good and evil, and beyond nihilism. However, Nietzsche’s work focuses on questions and not answers, and he himself says, “nobody will divine thereby how ye looked in your morning, you sudden sparks and marvels of my solitude, you, my old, beloved—*evil* thoughts!” [BGE, 237].

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