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Foundations III

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Confessions of a Nietzschean Mind

With the advent of Christianity, the Christian idea of God became a major force in western philosophical thought. Its impact has been so powerful that today, the Christian value system is a way of life for over two billion people worldwide. Augustine's *Confessions* is a fascinating insight into this system through the eyes of a man's very personal relationship with God. *Confessions* evokes the imagery of a sinner asking for forgiveness at the altar of God. This submission to the Christian faith is what Fredrich Nietzsche critically examined in his books. A self-professed atheist, Nietzsche’s work directly attacked not just Christians but the very core of Christian values. Evaluating themes like sin and asceticism, as presented in *Confessions* through Nietzschean ideals, reveals how the book projects suffering as the focal point of human existence and derives the meaning of life from it. The argument then from a Nietzschean perspective is to realize that it's not the case, and celebrating life, with all its joys and sorrows, is more important than a dogmatic belief in a religious ideology. While working through this argument, we will get a window to some famous Nietzschean concepts with an opportunity to reflect on his ideas on the importance of truth.

The concept of transvaluation of all values is a powerful tool that Nietzsche develops to question the existing moral norms and applies it to understand the notion of good and evil as prevalent in contemporary society. In essay one of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche gives a fascinating account of what Abrahamic religions proclaim as *the good* and how it distorts the original meaning of the concept: “While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different,’ what is ‘not itself’… in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world” (36). The ground-breaking idea that Nietzsche gives here is that virtues like pity, forgiveness, and docility were attributes of the weak. These were the traits of the class of people, in many ways, the slaves in the ancient society, who were under the control of a powerful ruler, a master. The noble class saw themselves as the creator and beholder of all that is good: *the truthful*. To assert this identity, they used their power and designated themselves as good as opposed to the weaker general populace:

They designate themselves simply by their superiority in power … They call themselves, for instance, “the truthful” … who possesses reality, who is actual, who is true; then, with a subjective turn, the true as the truthful: in this phase of conceptual transformation it becomes a slogan and catchword of the nobility and passes over entirely into the sense of “noble,” as distinct from the lying common man. (29)

As a result, values like strength, domination, and vengeance of this powerful, noble class came to be considered good. These attributes helped the master lead a fuller life and have authority over several subjects. However, this caused resentment amongst the ruled class. The priestly class, who had their own ambitions to attain power but could not do so by strength, exploited this resentment by projecting the image of evil onto the ruler. They proclaimed – “The wretched alone are the good… the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God… the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity” (34). This declaration by the priestly class of the nobles and their virtues as evil and antithetical to that of commoners resulted in a total inversion of pre-existing values. In this new world order, master morals were despised, and slave morality was championed. Slave morality thrives on rejecting all the life-affirming processes encouraged by master morality and over-emphasizes on suffering being the only truth of human existence. Hence, this new moral system only exists in defiance to the master morality and seeks validation in opposing something external to it, rather than finding value in itself. With the help of this evaluation, Nietzsche wants to inspire his readers to not take any given value system on the insistence of a figurehead, remain critical of it, and even change it if necessary. The aim is to reevaluate the concept of good and evil as given by slave morality and replace it with a new set of values that can provide meaning to human suffering without negating life.

Nietzsche's evaluation of existing moral norms leads him to denounce ascetic ideals and say *yes* to life-affirming values. Nietzsche sees the high regard given to ascetic ideals in many religious philosophies as a life-negating attitude. Speaking of asceticism, Nietzsche says in essay two of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “The ascetic treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins, or as a mistake that is put right by deeds” (117). He further elaborates this by calling “ascetic life … a self-contradiction” where a person “wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself” and where “physiological well-being itself is viewed askance" (118). The point here is that leading an ascetic lifestyle puts a human at odds with his own nature. He sees human existence as a mistake that seeks correction in rejecting the world. He despises life and all its gifts by abstaining himself of all the sensual pleasures. By trying to master one's desires and instincts, the capacity to appreciate life decreases. According to Nietzsche, the right way to live is precisely opposite to what ascetics preach: to affirm and enjoy life in all its sufferings and pleasures. Practicing such an acceptance and love of own fate is called *Amor fati*. Nietzsche lays out this concept in *The Gay Science*: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth!... some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer” (223, § 276). Nietzsche believes that the necessary condition to live life is to see good and bad as being inextricably linked. The true meaning of life then lies in accepting and acknowledging life with all its ups and downs and not just simply rejecting earthly experiences in the name of asceticism.

To accept life with all the desires and shortcomings is no small feat, and Augustine grappled with this when he posits that humans are born in sin, due to which coaction of guilt and suffering governs the journey of our lives. He makes the case that the crying of babies and throwing tantrums for milk or attention is not due to lack of understanding but the play of an inner demon in all our hearts. He masterfully crafts his argument in the following lines:

Try his best to strike and hurt others … when they (parents) do not give in to him and refuse to pander to whims which would so him harm. This shows that, if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy. (Augustine, “*Confessions*” 28)

By describing need as a negative attribute, he makes a puissant assertion that human instincts are the root cause of evil. We are never free from sin and servants to our own baser desires from the very beginning: “if I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me, where, I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent?” (28). This perspective of seeing sin in the very act of life makes sure that we see our existence as blameworthy, which justifies suffering. In other words, we are guilty from the moment we are born, and hence we suffer. Looking at this argument from the other end, we can also say that we suffer because we are guilty, and this guilt is what provides meaning to our suffering and makes it bearable. For Augustine, this interplay of suffering and guilt creates a world of its own, encompassing all human life, its motives, and desires. This bidirectional relationship dictates the overall meaning of life, and the entirety of the human experience is then reduced to a sinful existence for which we should be repentant.

Nietzsche finds the attitude of finding sin in human instincts as abhorrent and calls for an evaluation of Christian morality. Nietzsche lays out his counter in the following lines: “The ‘holy people,’ … had rejected everything of the earth as ‘unholy,’ ‘worldly,’ ‘sinful’ – this people put its instincts into a final formula that was logical to the point of self-annihilation” (Nietzsche, “*The Antichrist*” 88, § 27). To Nietzsche, this is the very inversion of noble values, of finding pleasure on the earth, that the priestly class helped cause. By declaring the earthly experience as sinful, priests created a class of people who devalue every aspect of the real world. The meaning of life then comes from seeing suffering as the only reality which needs mitigation via rejection of worldly pleasures. A belief of this sort trivializes life and needs to be kept in check. Hence, there is a need for “The transvaluation of Christian values, -an attempt with all available means, all instincts and all the resources of genius to bring about a triumph of the opposite values, the more noble values” (177, § 61). Such an evaluation is necessary so that noble values like seeking joy and maximizing pleasure, which are life-affirming, can again dominate the self-negating values espoused by Christianity. At play here is the Nietzschean belief that though suffering is an unavoidable part of life, it is not the center of all human experience. Hence, there is a need for a conscious effort to move towards values that bring happiness to human life. Opposition via re-examination of what Christianity describes as moral behavior is a helpful way to develop an acceptance that human nature is not nefarious but joyful.

The idea of seeking pleasure from human activities is something Augustine presents as giving into temptations and asks Almighty to give him the strength to overcome them. Section 30 to 35 of Book 10 in *Confessions* illustrates the pleasure Augustine still finds in activities like eating, listening to music, or looking at works of art. He sees indulging in them as “gratification of corrupt nature, gratification of the eye, the empty pomp of living” (233). These distractions have the power to take him away from God's grace, so he makes a moving plea in the following lines: “Every day I try my hardest to resist these temptations. I call for your helping hand and tell you of my difficulties, because this is problem Which I have not yet resolved … By your mercy may you keep it far from me! For no man can be master of himself, except of God's bounty” (235). The idea here is the same as we encountered before: the tendency to see temptations as vile and sinful. What is required to combat this evil is a high level of control over physical and psychological needs. The practice of ascetic ideals like abstinence, humility, and chastity develops this self-control which in turn helps reduce suffering. However, human will alone cannot resist the impulses of mind and body; hence it has to depend on God to achieve this goal. Human beings must give way to God's will to work through them as God alone has the power to forgive humans for the weaknesses of the flesh and redeem them. For Augustine, humans lack the power to fully overcome desires stemming from their sinful nature, and hence, surrendering to God’s will to obtain ascetic ideals is the only way forward.

As per Augustine, conquering one's desires through asceticism presents itself as the only solution to suffering, but Nietzschean ideology points out the problems in this approach. Ascetic approach to life sees indulgence in any pleasure-giving activity with suspicion and disapproval as it runs counter to the truth asceticism believes in, i.e., suffering. Speaking of the preoccupation of asceticism with suffering, Nietzsche remarks:

While pleasure is felt and sought in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice. All this is the highest degree paradoxical: we stand before a discord that wants to be discordant, that enjoys itself in this suffering and even grows more self-confident and triumphant the more its own presupposition, its physiological capacity for life, decreases, “Triumph in the ultimate agony”. (Nietzsche, “*Genealogy*” 118).

Seen through this lens of deprivation and abstinence, the entirety of human experience on earth is just seen as suffering, and that itself becomes the meaning of life. Here, Nietzsche highlights the convoluted relationship an ascetic has with pleasure. An ascetic obtains rapture in the denial of sensual pleasures. He rejects his needs and takes great pride in his ability to overcome his own human nature. Though psychologically satisfying, it comes at an enormous physiological cost. The more a person practices asceticism, the more this life-negating force in him strengthens, and he becomes ever more detached from the real world. He takes his physical well-being for granted and brings himself to privation. So, even though asceticism provides a means to alleviate suffering, by trying to master personal desires and instincts, the capacity to appreciate life decreases.

Augustine asserts that the route to ascetic control goes through the subjugation to God's will, but Nietzsche criticizes submission to God as a lack of self-discipline which impedes self-actualization. Both Augustine and Nietzsche remark on the capacity of humans to self-regulate. Whereas Augustine sees such control on oneself as impossible and invokes God's assistance, Nietzsche has a more nuanced opinion on the topic. Nietzsche deems it necessary for humans to have a constraint on themselves as it provides the basic scaffolding on which the character is built:

One thing is needful. – To ‘give style’ to one’s character … It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye …

Conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves that *hate* the constraint of style. (Nietzsche, “*The Gay Science*” 233, § 290)

Applying this argument to asceticism, Nietzsche recognizes that living by such standards has value to it as it transforms a simple person into a work of art. Ascetic self-control has influenced the culture of human civilization in every era by lending depth and complexity to human character. The practice of asceticism is an art in itself, and hence, there is a certain beauty in the object this art creates. Not following any style in character building is a trait of the weak, who doesn't have the self-discipline to mold his personality into something beautiful. Influenced by this thought process, Nietzsche questions the unquestioning subjugation to God instead of relying on our own will. Surrendering our will to a supposedly higher power or a singular concept is limiting in many ways of which Nietzsche tries to warn:

Let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself” … the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be. But to eliminate the will altogether … what would that mean but to castrate the intellect? (Nietzsche, “*Genealogy*” 119).

The message for us is to stop having a blind belief in any ideology or supernatural entity. No single power or concept can explain the whole of human existence and its purpose on earth. Giving control of our will into the hands of someone or something limits learning about the world and is not the best use of our intellectual capacity. On the other hand, the more we open ourselves to different experiences, the more we will understand life. When combined with the concept of *Amor fati*, this approach affirms living human life to its full potential and accepting everything in the journey, the good and the bad, as inevitable. Using the constructive force of self-control and developing a belief in our own existence instead of submission to God's will, we can gain a higher appreciation for life.

Nietzsche extends the criticism of absolute devotion to God and into the domain of truth by questioning the merit of the very concept and instead presents art as the way forward. As per Nietzsche, the core ideal from where religion or science draws its power is the deification of truth. On the subject, he says, “That which constrains these men, however, this unconditional will to truth, is faith in the ascetic ideal itself … it is the faith in a metaphysical value, the absolute value of truth, sanctified and guaranteed by this ideal alone” (Nietzsche, “*Genealogy*” 151). Nietzsche believes that devotion to a supernatural entity, via asceticism, is just this faith that the most valuable thing in the universe is to find the truth about existence. Nobody is even questioning whether this search has any value, any meaning? He puts forth this point forcefully by stating, “At this point it is necessary to pause and take careful stock … how much will to truth itself first requires justification; here there is a lacuna in every philosophy … truth was posited as being, as God, as the highest court of appeal – because truth was not permitted to be a problem” (152). For Nietzsche, over-credulity towards the power of truth is a significant hindrance in searching for other modes of living that can reveal the nature of the universe in ways hitherto unimagined. Nietzsche finally suggests art as the remedy to the problem of truth. He presents “art, in which precisely the lie is sanctified and the will to deception has a good conscience” (153) as an alternative to science and religion and promoter of an opposing value to truth. In imitation and representation, lie is not seen as a negative attribute of an object. In fact, the depiction of the object/concept is enhanced by the lie leading to its greater appreciation. Nietzsche even suggests a synthesis of art and ascetic values that can help in the exploration of life: “even in those cases in which … antithesis between chastity and sensuality really exists, there is fortunately no need for it to be a tragic antithesis … It is precisely such ‘contradictions’ that seduce one to existence” (99). What is implied here is to find beauty in the tussle between self-control and carnal desires. The resulting happiness and suffering are both indispensable parts of life and together complete the human experience. Bringing out the contradictory nature of these forces through art can develop a richer understanding of life. By throwing shade on the value of truth and promoting art as the champion of a diametric ideal, Nietzsche brings a provocative proposition to philosophy.

Nietzsche's broadsides against truth and his solution to find refuge in art seem compelling, but when we bring human nature into context as Augustine does, it reveals the gaps in Nietzsche's thinking. For Augustine, truth and God are inseparable. Devotion to God brings a human closer to the truth, and here lies a crucial aspect that *Confessions* tries to highlight. The reason we value truth is not due to some philosophy or divine command. It is because truth appeals to the human intellect, to its inner nature. Section 23 of Book 10 in *Confessions* mentions this fact: “This is the happiness all desire. All desire this, the only true state of happiness. All desire to rejoice in the truth” (229). And a fact it is! Whatever philosophy we want to believe in, the end goal is a desire for happiness, often linked with knowing the truth about ourselves and nature. Taking the Nietzschean argument against truth at face value denies humans in following their own inner calling. Augustine makes an astute observation about human nature when he says, “it (human mind) loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it … Yet even in this wretched state it would still rather find joy in truth than in falsehood” (230). The idea here is simple - even when a person is hiding something or lies to someone, he always wants the truth for himself. This behavior owes to human preference for truth over deceptions and imitations because it brings inner peace and satisfaction. Here we can almost see Nietzsche coming with a rebuttal with his belief in art as a higher ideal. However, again his approach seems to be missing the point that art itself is a pursuit in representing all phenomena and, hence, just another way of looking into reality. Whether abstract or direct, it jolts the human consciousness so that the truth about its own emotions can be revealed. An artist, even in deception, is revealing something about the world. That revelation is what truth is. Here lie exists as an opposing force to truth, and its value is essentially in illuminating truth. It is almost ironic that Nietzsche makes a similar argument against slave morality by accusing it of deriving its power in negating the master morals. Hence, we can see how Nietzschean philosophy falls short of capturing the real essence of the belief in truth, as explained in Confessions, due to its omission of the human dimension and over-reliance on the power of imitation.

Looking at Confessions from a Nietzschean mindset does provide a fresh outlook into the Christian belief system. Though there are gaps in the Nietzschean way of thinking about truth, overall, it serves as a useful framework to evaluate the Christian belief in suffering and its authority on all aspects of life. In this process, we realize that suffering is not the heart but just a part of human existence. Applying Christian morals to provide meaning to life through suffering reduces the human ability to live a fuller life. The takeaway of this entire exercise is a profound realization that acceptance of our own lives, with all its strengths and weaknesses, is an opportunity to find happiness within ourselves rather than in an antithetical religious ideology.

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