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Good is Dead

"Listen, then. I say that Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."

Ah the age-old Thrasymachus problem. With one mighty sentence, Plato opened an ethical debate that will never be closed; what if justice is nothing more than the mask of power? Since the early hour of the Republic to the mid-day yawn of the Enlightenment, moral philosophy has guarded its precious concepts of *real* justice against this violent whisper. Thinkers of many types from many eras have shielded their ideals by assuming an ethereal nature of their most valued words (justice, truth, good) as axioms of their ethic. But Thrasymachus dares to ask the disarming question silently bubbling beneath the surface of these philosophies---what if justice is nothing more than a construct with an end?

To claim that justice is not a façade, that it exists outside of the castles and the schools and the churches and the minds, is a difficult task without some concept of objective good. With objective good, we gain a standard by which to define universal truths like justice, morality, and virtue. With objective good we also discover the objective bad: evil, sin, treachery and immorality. From Plato's Republic and Augustine's City of God, to Kant's kingdom of ends, the ideal good is a cornerstone of Western moral philosophy. This concept serves as a standard by which thinkers can define right and wrong, good and evil, and ultimately, moral and immoral. By insisting on the true, the good, the actual, they make moralities that transcend human agency, banishing the Thrasymachus problem from their minds.

But how can we respond to the Thrasymachus problem if God is dead---if Good is dead? What happens if you trace back the origins of good and bad to find that they were only ever linguistic distinctions? Can you still have justice? Can you still have a morality?

In Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals, the answer is a hesitant yes. Through discerning what a morality is not, we learn what it perhaps could be. Nietzsche's morality is unique because it must be forged, not realized. In light of the recognition that no hand beyond our own compells us to build the Eiffel tower, eat shellfish, or save the Wales, a morality can exist, but it should be of a different nature, and have different ends that of the religious or ideal. If Heaven and perfection do not exist, life must be purely anthocentric, and grounded in experience. Instead of morality supplanting human vigor to the truth or good or God, Nietzsche's morality seeks to raise human "greatness", through the evolution beyond Good and Evil.

Our first vision of the "Good" as something possessed by a higher world (that Nietzsche despises) is most notably pioneered in Plato's Republic. Plato's memorable sunlight analogy posits the form of the good as a force in nature---something that exists prior to the mind, and language.

"What the good itself is in the intelligible realm in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to light and visible things" (Plato, 508c).

For Plato, the visible realm is the parade of shadows that we perceive, wispy fragments of the pure forms beyond the cave. This exterior realm of pure idea and abstract perfection that Plato calls the intelligible realm is just as much outside of our agency as the sunlight. If humans had never existed, the sun would shine just the same. Likewise, the Platonic good exists regardless of our ethical systems.

To Nietzsche, any theory of a world above worlds---the intelligible realm included---is a fabrication, one that relies on an uninvestigated concept of truth. Nietzsche criticizes Plato for never doubting the existence of the abstract world, while using it to support many of his moral standpoints. According to this view, philosophers, "are all oblivious of how much the will to truth itself first requires justification," a justification that was never performed ,"because the ascetic ideal has hitherto *dominated* all philosophy, because truth was posited as being, as God, as the highest court of appeal---because truth was not *permitted* to be a problem at all" (Nietzsche, 152). Reliance on truth, God, or the good, according to Nietzsche, requires faith. Faith that only makes humanity more loathing of its reality, for such ascetic idealism, "treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins…as a bridge to another existence" (Nietzsche, 117). By transferring all desire to another world beyond our own, we devalue our real experience in the hopes of an imaginary future.

If we set Nietzsche's qualms aside for a moment and consider the good to be as Plato has defined it, as, "that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower," then we must accept the good as something far beyond any human control. It is something we can perhaps observe and measure, something we can strive to embody, but it is nothing we can *alter* (Plato, 509b).

It is from within this framework of perfect forms that Plato is able to refute Thrasymachus' argument. He responds by stating, "according to your account, it is just to do not only what is to the advantage of the stronger, but also the opposite, what is not to their advantage" (Plato, 339d). Plato brings up the problem of consistency; because rulers might accidentally make laws that do not correspond with their interests, justice as defined by Thrasymachus could command contradicting actions.

And this inconsistency is enough to de-value the definition! To Plato, justice, like love, or truth, or the good, *must be* some sort of eternal form---his philosophical project is only to realize the nature of this form. But, in line with Nietzsche's criticism, Plato never considers why this must be. If Plato were wrong, and justice were merely a word, the absurdity of both an action and its opposite falling into the same moral category might not seem so outlandish. Perhaps Thrasymachus meant what Plato was too dogmatic to see, that justice is something flawed and human---a word with too much weight.

If we trace "Good" further through the Western tradition, we find that the concept of a Christian *God* is quite like Plato's *form of the good*. In City of God, Augustine makes this comparison himself when he says, "there is only one Good which will bring happiness to a rational or intellectual creature; and that Good is god" (Augustine, 471). A being of absolute perfection that created all value is simply Plato's good anthologized. Both concepts serve the same purpose; they re-assure us of value in the universe beyond our own subjective comprehension, for, "there is only one unchanging Good; and that is the one, true, and blessed God. All things he made are good because they were made by him" (Augustine, 472).

Nearly 1400 years later, Kant also crafts a philosophy that relies heavily on ideals beyond experience. Kant's crutch is what he calls simply, "good in-id of itself," an insistence on "pure good," that follows the golden thread of Christianity and Platonism. As meaningless as "good in itself" sounds to Nietzsche, the phrase feels comfortable within Kant's philosophical framework. Through his distinction between phenomena (subjective experiences) and noumena, "the pure concepts of understanding," which go, "beyond objects of experience to things in themselves" (Kant, 60), the good fits within the noumenal world. Kant's insistence on a world more real than our own, and the banishment of "good" into this inaccessible place is just another example of

what Nietzsche calls sickly, resentful, priestly thinking (Nietzsche, 128). Such thought is not unlike Plato's faith in the form of the good, tucked away on the highest shelf of the intelligible realm, so that we are destined to fail on our climb towards an impossible perfection.

The pure good also plays a central role in Kant's definition of the good will, which "is not good because of what if affects…nor because of its fitness to attain some intended end, but good just by its willing, i.e. in itself" (Kant, 10). It is tempting to get absorbed in the critique of utilitarianism here and forget to ask what exactly this good *is*? The same question we asked of Plato's justice can be asked of Kant's pure good. If it is possible to evaluate the moral worth of an action a priori, then that "good" by which we are judging the will must exist a priori too. Removing any empirical good that might result from an action means we must be talking about abstract, pure, ideal, noumenal good. As for what this means, and how we can know it, there is little explanation.

Kant's noumenal good, Plato's form of the good and Augustine's God, are all abstract ideas exists independently of the human mind. While Kant supposes the good can be partially accessed through the will, and Plato supposes the good can be glimpsed through reason, neither *God* nor *the good* nor *the form of the good* were created by people or are subject to change.

After millennia of such pervasive reasoning, Nietzsche finally comes along to drive a stake deep into this assumption. Unlike thinkers in the Platonic-Christian tradition who suppose that good is something beyond human language, external to the self, existence, and human values, Nietzsche makes an argument for the good and bad as linguistic categories; words that evolved along with the human race, with origins just as primitive as early man. He states,

"The protracted and domineering fundamental total feeling on the part of a higher ruling order in relation to a lower order, to a 'below'---that is the origin of the antithesis 'good' and 'bad'," (Nietzsche, 26).

How simple and direct. Instead of envisioning the good as some abstract perfection that our language merely encapsulates, Nietzsche treats the good and the bad as human constructs, which came into language not to guide us to the ascetic life, but for the simple purpose of creating a self-congratulatory "pathos of distance" between two groups.

A similar veil is removed for words denoting rank of the soul like "pure" and "impure." By looking at the original meaning of these words, Nietzsche finds they are not at all sacrosanct; "The 'pure one' is from the beginning merely a man who washes himself, who forbids himself certain foods that produce skin ailments, who does not sleep with the dirty women of the lower strata, who has an aversion to blood---no more, hardly more!"(Nietzsche, 32). In their earliest hour, pure and impure were nothing more than distinctions about cleanliness and power! Over generations, words with such little substance came to grip us by their false consecration. The good, the bad, purity, impurity, these words do not signify something we can just tap into---like sap within a maple tree. They instead denote malleable man-made organizational categories.

To what can we attribute such a dramatic and disarming shift in the intellectual tradition? In part, we have Nietzsche's use of genealogy to thank (or perhaps, resent). Genealogy is a historical and philosophical tool for understanding the evolution of concepts through the evolution of language and its meaning. Because Nietzsche is concerned first with words and then with ideas, it is no surprise that he comes to a completely different conclusion than the thinkers who started with ideas, and then turned upon the world. For Plato, Augustine, and Kant, words are merely doors to true meaning. Through Nietzsche's perspectivism, through his denial that a

Slave morality, in contrast, takes what was the negative space of the master morality, and makes this the foreground of its image. What was precisely the weakness of man is transformed into its good. What was once the greatest form of man becomes its evil. Nietzsche finds Judeo-Christian religions particularly guilty of this, “inversion of the aristocratic value equation.” The original equation, which said that “good = noble = powerful = beautiful = beloved of God," is flipped in order to claim that “the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, are blessed by God” (Nietzsche, 34).

At first, this observation makes it seem as though Nietzsche is simply angry with the slaves for overthrowing their masters. In fact, many hate groups have interpreted Nietzsche as someone who simply wants to justify the powerful dominating the weak. But this is an oversimplification of the terms slave and master. As Steinhart points out in his book on Nietzsche,

“Master and slave are ethical categories for Nietzsche. Master and slave are not legal categories. So, masters may be legally bound and may be forced to labor in chains under the cruel whips of slaves...Master and Slave are really types of characters” (Steinhart, 68).

If this view is correct, that people with power are just as likely to be slaves as the poorest laborers, the question then remains: why this dichotomy between slave and master morality?

The answer lies in the quotation, “this No is its creative deed.” Reactive moralities say “No,” to what was once good, and “Yes,” to what was once bad, but still do so within the lie of good and evil. The problem with reaction is that it simply re-arranges meaning, without overcoming its faith in objective good. When a truly noble morality defines its own good, it leaves behind this false dichotomy in search of a more wonderful image of humanity. A noble morality moves us towards “the overman,” a hyper evolved and aware version of mankind. But

reactive moralities enforce the primitive idea that good and evil are real external categories. Such moralities use religion or idealism to oppose man's greatness, thus, they create slave-like characters on a wide scale.

Noble thinking is therefore superior in Nietzsche's eyes because it pushes us to evolve against our herd-instinct. Since values are *always* made, choosing values that promote the greatness of humanity on Earth becomes the only purpose of having morals at all. Nietzsche's master morality is led by the especially great and organizationally talented individuals, those "superhumans" who can think choose values that are best for humanity in the long run. This more enlightened man is certainly a more tangible end for morality than the aims posed by idealists, but one might still ask whether the superhuman itself is an ideal.

Now that we have seen Nietzsche's creation of a new vision for morality, his relentless bashing of good and bad, and his dismantling of religion and ideal truths, we might imagine that Nietzsche would agree wholeheartedly with Thrasymachus' original claim that, "Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger." While this definition of justice is much more in line with Nietzsche's than Plato's or Kant's, for Nietzsche, justice, like all other ideals on Earth, is "weakness is being lied into something *meritorious*," (Nietzsche, 47). Given this repulsion towards ideals of every kind, it is not entirely unlikely that Nietzsche would spin this problem on its head and make the frightening claim that *Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the weak.*

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