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The Nietzsche-Nazi Dilemma

The overly abundant amount of scholarship attempting to resolve the supposed connection between Nietzsche and Nazism has unfortunately yielded very little result. This highly contentious issue is so widely debated mainly because relevant discourse on the matter rarely emerges from categorical disputes. The Nietzsche-Nazi relationship is normally engaged as a sort of checklist marking agreements and disagreements; here we find Nietzsche saying something that sounds "Hitlerian", there we find a specific condemnation of the very sort of movement the Nazis embodied. The goal of this kind of scholarship is usually to vindicate or indict Nietzsche as pro- or anti-Nazi. Although I consider this a very serious and worthy endeavor, I also think this approach to Nietzsche, one that is more socio-historical in nature, is a highly incompatible format for understanding his relationship to Nazism. The fact is no matter what cultural, political, or social movement you have in mind, you can most likely find direct evidence in Nietzsche both for and against that specific movement. This is because Nietzsche rarely allowed his dynamic thought process to settle into various positions, and is thus often misperceived as a self-contradicting thinker. The nature of his thought cannot be grasped in terms of mere agreement or disagreement; any valuable study linking Nietzsche to Nazism must take place outside of this template.

For the purposes of illustrating this phenomena, I will course through the ostensible versions of the Nietzsche-Nazi link. Although I will argue that the Nazis utilized a grossly inaccurate interpretation, I will also indicate the importance of "Nietzsche the cultural figure" as an ideological breeding ground. This analysis,

however, will quickly appear inadequate for grasping the more important link between Nietzsche and the Nazis. This link, I will argue, is found in the unprecedented decision on human life in terms of "health", a 20th century politico-historical event that was already delineated philosophically by Nietzsche.

The Nietzsche-Nazi link is not at all a surprising issue. The categorical relationships between the thinker and the movement are astoundingly similar: Nietzsche was against Christianity, democracy, socialism, anarchism, bourgeois culture, ranted about pervasive cultural decadence, and employed a visceral terminological catalogue to describe his philosophical positions. He frequently denounced modes of modern "effeminacy", including moral prudence and equality of rights. The charged, vehement style of his delivery, often geared towards effect, fostered an image of incomparable radicality. This was exactly the way Nietzsche wanted to be perceived; he did not want to be mistaken for just another variation of all the cultural perversions he diagnosed and loathed.

Yet many of these perversions that he denounced included those he would ultimately come to be associated with. Cultural historians linking him to Nazism frequently overlook his yearning for a more pan-European mentality and his subsequent denigration of all nationalistic ambitions. They also tend to ignore his more than sparing admiration for Jews and his repulsion at the site of growing anti-Semitic proselytizing in the latter half of the 19th century. And above all else, Nietzsche's theoretical conceptions such as the "Blond Beast", the Overman, and the doctrine of the will to power continue to receive the shallow politicization that is worlds beneath an appropriate understanding of philosophical essence.

Yet within this back and forth network of accusations is a more than

superficial categorical dilemma which faces Nietzschean apologists. Though we can find enough evidence in his works which would seem to castigate fascist ideology, there are also areas of Nietzsche's thought which unfortunately coincide with National Socialist modalities in compelling ways. This, perhaps, is the most regrettable aspect of Nietzsche's "blitzkrieg"-style thought, which often enjoyed plucking at mankind's morally designated taboos.

Nietzsche's nearly mythological stature in German culture leading up and into the Third Reich served as a significant prop upon which the Nazis furnished much of their ideology. In Nietzsche, the Nazis discovered a tremendous resource of intellectual energy.

...the very employment of Nietzsche as a foil for coming to terms with National Socialism demonstrate[s] the centrality of that thinker as definitive of the Nazi order... Many perceived that the present revolutionary epoch had to be defined, grasped, and even opposed through such a confrontation with Nietzsche.¹

This perhaps touches more on what I mean by an "ideological breeding ground". Nietzsche's radical leaning in a critical juncture of history was a seductive and powerful force for all of the quickly developing political movements. The primary developments of a relationship between Nietzsche and a movement like Nazism had little to do even with basic categorical connections. Nietzsche was essentially the tallest mountain in the radical landscape, and his mysterious philosophical methodology was important for all those desperately seeking anti-modernist guidance: "Who better provided the outlines for the desired post-Christian, post-Enlightenment, anti-Kantian society"². The first step in approaching the Nietzsche-Nazi relationship has little to do with similarities or differences. One must recognize the fact that a

¹ Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 255

² Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 242

radical movement of German culture had few other options of comparable intellectual monumentality that could be incorporated within an ideological framework.

Here is where the picture becomes more comprehensive and thus more complicated. Nietzsche's influence extended over a far greater range than just the political gangsterism of Nazi Germany. His was an almost symbolic role, a lonely and desperate prophet acting as herald to the looming crisis of modernity.

What has enabled the untimely Nietzsche to be perennially timely?... the answer must be sought in his ability to define... the farthest reaches of the general post-Enlightenment predicament; to encapsulate many of its enduring spiritual and intellectual tensions, contradictions, hopes, and possibilities... Nietzsche was paradigmatic.³

Nietzsche was nothing short of a cultural stethoscope measuring the growing perils of the modern condition (though his labyrinthine intellect forbids any common understanding). In this regard, Nietzsche must be initially understood as the touchstone of an era, the father figure whose guidance provided the first steps into the blinding light of modernity. In the words of Carl Jung, Nietzsche "...tried to formulate what is actually happening in the collective unconscious of modern man, to give words to that disturbance"⁴. His significance to the modern-man's apprehension of an increasingly complex world cannot be understated.

For all those searching for significant intellectual support in the "remolding" project of the modern landscape, Nietzsche served as an indispensable catalyst: "in its various guises, then, Nietzscheanism did tend to nudge political and cultural life into more radical or, at least, nonconformist directions"⁵. This is the most readily available grasp of Nietzsche possible, because coursing through the bodies of his seminal texts

³ Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 313

⁴ C.J. Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, vol. 1 p. 104

⁵ Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 312

is often shocking and perplexing. Nietzsche saw tremendous problems with just about every facet of western culture as it developed beyond the Greco-Roman template.

One of his more consequential projects was to wage war on belief in morality: "All these moralities that address themselves to the individual...are baroque and unreasonable in form—because they address themselves to all, because they generalize where one must not generalize"⁶. Nietzsche's assault on morality gives off an unmistakable pretension of superiority; he does not hesitate for a moment to suggest that general moral schemas do not apply to everyone: "They are at one in their tough resistance to every special claim, every special right and privilege..."⁷.

Nietzsche's endorsement of an aristocratic mentality and social structure was surely appealing to the radical right in Germany.

From his charge against the follies of "herd" morality, Nietzsche furnished the basis for a critique of all modern institutions as merely refined developments of this basic problem.

...the peacefully industrious democrats and ideologists of revolution, and even more so of the delirious philosophers and brotherhood enthusiasts who call themselves socialists and want a "free society".⁸

Nietzsche developed a sort of conspiracy-theory perspective of the developments of the modern world, in which even disparate institutions were at one in the fight against "select privileges"⁹. So for all those who were at odds with the developing currents of modern culture and in a desperate search for energized alternatives, Nietzsche was not just a support structure, he was the author of a contemporary social mythology. One need look no further than Nietzsche for an insurmountable treatise rebuking the

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 198

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 201

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 202

horrendous developments of modernity. And as a philosophical treatise which operates upon structures of epistemology, psychology, and sociology, Nietzsche provided more than enough concrete "evidence" for all to see.

Perhaps Nietzsche's most significant impact on Nazism was his ability to synthesize all opponents of a "higher culture" into one enemy unit. No matter how opposed two institutions appeared, Nietzsche was able to furnish surprisingly equitable grounds. Consider his claim about Christianity as "Platonism for the people"¹⁹, or that the Christian theological system is nothing more than a miscarriage of the Jewish moral schema²⁰. Politically, he grouped movements as incompatible as democracy and socialism into one ideological box, the attempt to remake society into a landscape of total equality²¹. Thus if we consider the earlier mentioned categorical similarities between Nietzsche and Nazism as a list of societal opponents, it becomes clear how powerful Nietzsche's arguments were: he had already provided an indictment of all those the Nazis would one day call enemies. He was also highly influential in generating the ideal of a counter-cause, that which would combat the forces of degenerating culture: "...the 'European problem' as I understand it, the cultivation of a new caste that will rule Europe"²². This calling to a higher order supported by an abundant polemical corpus was no doubt a gold mine for the concerns of Nazi ideology. They had within their immediate historical grasp a pseudo-champion for many of their proposed ambitions.

Was not the present reality the fulfillment of Nietzsche's vitalist vision? Nazism was, after all, a regenerationist, post-democratic, post-Christian social order where the weak, decrepit and useless were to be legislated out of existence.²³

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 193

²⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I-36

²¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 202

²² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 251

Yet I mentioned in the opening of this paper my belief in the superficiality of a categorical relationship. This claim stems from two main reasons. First, it has already been mentioned how diffuse and widespread Nietzsche's influence became in the 20th century, so this seems to water down the significance of his categorical relationship to the Nazis (he had a categorical relationship with almost every movement). Second, we should make an effort to understand just how irreconcilable Nietzsche's thought is with Nazism. Nietzsche was utterly opposed to three of the most fundamental tenets of the National Socialist system: nationalism, Germanism, and anti-Semitism. In fact, a more accurate rendering of Nietzsche's thought reveals the fact that he probably would have considered Nazism the epitome of all his concerns: "...the democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of tyrants..."¹⁴. The subscription of independent individuality within statehood would have appalled history's most freethinking spirit. Nietzsche was also rarely silent or subtle about his opinion of German *Reich* culture: "Examples among the Germans today include now the anti-French stupidity, now the anti-Jewish, now the anti-Polish..."¹⁵. Even though a checklist of similarities exists, one can be sure that Nietzsche would not have supported a tyrannical movement of German nationalism.

The Jewish question, however, is highly problematic. It is apparent just how important a role anti-Semitism played for the Nazi movement. Anti-Semitism was an essential component to the formation of the new German identity, a negative affirmation of German cleanliness. Jewish hatred also helped in energizing the Nazi party by presenting a common enemy and source of all sorrow and hardship to the

¹⁴ Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 239

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 242

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 251

German Volk. For Nietzsche, anti-Semitism never emerged from its obvious foothold within the network of growing nationalistic hostility and overall ignorance.

I again remind readers who have ears for such things of that Berlin apostle of revenge, Eugen Dühring, who employs moral mumbo-jumbo more indecently and repulsively than anyone else in Germany today; Dühring, the foremost moral big-mouth today—unsurpassed even among his own ilk, the anti-Semites.¹⁶

This and many other passages in Nietzsche's work express very clearly his repudiation of growing German anti-Semitism as a palpable syndrome of overall cultural decay.

Nietzsche is also frequently favorable towards Jewish culture, a noticeable contrast to his anti- anti-Semitism: "The Jews, however, are beyond any doubt the strongest, toughest, and purest race now living in Europe"¹⁷. This perspective of Nietzsche's attitude toward Jewish culture would seem to vindicate him on the Jewish question were it not for the disturbing polemical suggestions made in the *Genealogy of Morals*, perhaps Nietzsche's most organized and philosophically formal text.

In the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche details in full the history of his famous contrast between "Master" and "Slave" moralities. Though it is often suggested in Nietzsche scholarship to resist the blundering pitfall of extracting literal meanings from Nietzsche's texts, the origin of "Slave" morality seems especially conspicuous: "...that with the Jews there begins *the slave revolt in morality*"¹⁸.

Nietzsche's virulent rhetoric against this Jewish "perpetration" gains uncomfortable steam as the essay develops: "What is certain, at least, is that *sub hoc signo Israel*, with its vengefulness and revaluation of all values, has hitherto triumphed again and again over all other ideals, over all nobler ideals"¹⁹. Nietzsche's development of the

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III-14

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 251

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, I-7

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, I-8

"Master"/"Slave" dichotomy in the schema of western morality is meant as an explanation for the downfall of western culture's most profound moment, Greco-Roman civilization. Although he is not trying to suggest that we should merely revert back to "Master" morality, Nietzsche does not hesitate to characterize the modern moral system as poisonous. This poison is stated clearly to originate from Jewish sentiments of "revenge" and "hatred". One could say that Nietzsche's argument here is not racial, but a philosophical dissertation on moral metaphysics. Yet at the heart of his argument is the Jewish race and its '*ressentiment*'. Although Nietzsche apparently prided himself for not being a part of the anti-Semitic cult of Germany, he provided what was obvious fuel for wrathful fires. In fact, Nietzsche's discussion of the Jews in the *Genealogy* is perhaps a more powerful raging against Jewish culture than any low brow anti-Semite is capable of formulating.

Not only does Nietzsche present a seductive "Jewish conspiracy" rendering of history in the first essay, his culminating moments in the third essay go several large steps further. This is where Nietzsche's suggestions can be said to contain direct theoretical parallels to the Nazi experience. It has been shown how Nietzsche views "Slave", or more explicitly Jewish morality as the downfall of western culture. In the third essay he suggest a programmatic resolution to the poison of growing cultural decline: "The sick represent the greatest danger to the healthy; it is not the strongest but the weakest who spell disaster for the strong"²⁸. In defining "Master" morality as healthy and "Slave" (Jewish) morality as sick, Nietzsche divides humanity into two highly abstract and ambiguous groups. One can never be sure exactly what constitutes a 'sick' person, the same for the supposedly 'healthy'. Yet Nietzsche is emphatic in

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III-14

his concern about this situation, and insistent on the maneuvers he considers necessary: "Their[the healthy] right to exist, the privilege of the full-toned bell over the false and cracked, is a thousand times greater: they alone are our warranty for the future..."²¹ One of the most irreconcilable elements of Nietzsche's thought, especially in a post-Auschwitz world, is his opinion of the fate that should befall the 'sick' in the name of humanity.

To create a new responsibility, that of the physician, for all cases in which the highest interest of life, or ascending life, demands the most inconsiderate pushing down and aside of degenerate life—for example, for the right of procreation, for the right to be born, for the right to live.²²

Nietzsche's call for a new world order embodies, I would argue, the very essence of what makes the Nazi experience so unforgettable. His concern for life marks much more than just an organic dimension of philosophical discourse. By making human life the primary object of philosophical legislation, Nietzsche philosophically delineates and justifies the socio-political sphere in which an Auschwitz can take place: "The philosopher as we understand him...as the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the overall development of man..."²³ Nietzsche is perhaps most famous as the self-proclaimed "Anti-Christ", the most devastating and consequential atheist who ever lived. Yet in light of the ambitions for all his philosophical progeny, one can see clearly what Nietzsche has in mind by trying so boldly to eradicate man's faith in God: he desires the space of God's seat for philosophy, the vantage point of judgment on the life of man. I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche is a raging fanatic bent on mass

²¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III-14

²² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, aph. 36

²³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 61

dominion and slaughter; his message is far from this. He perceives that faith in God as the binding glue of all social and moral structure is a cataclysmic mistake, the first step towards the development of mass cultural nihilism. Nietzsche is desperately trying to make man responsible for his own fate, while announcing the need for those capable of such responsibility.

Yet in describing history as the manifestation of a deeper struggle, between 'weakness' and 'strength' or 'sickness' and 'health', Nietzsche calls forth with philosophical trumpets the programmatic decision on life. The idea that something drastic needs to be done, that a great divide must be recognized amidst mankind, and that ruthless action must be taken, is far beyond the boundaries of ethically understandable thought. This abstract philosophical mythology of man against man, and of the call for the 'strong' man to start playing the role of nature and God, is similar to what Giorgio Agamben describes in *Homo Sacer*.

Today politics knows no value...other than life, and until the contradictions that this fact implies are dissolved, Nazism and fascism—which transformed the decision on bare life into the supreme political principle—will remain stubbornly with us.²⁴

Yet instead of using Agamben's abstract thesis regarding the inclusion of bare life within the juridical-political sphere as the decisive event of modernity, Nietzsche formulates the responsibility of life-as-health in explicit terms. His ironic stature as a philosopher only serves to heighten the impact of this message, that of a divine or mad herald whose prophecy shall one day come true.

In establishing the justification for the decision on life as the real connection between Nietzsche and Nazism, I believe I also touch on the true essence of Nazism. The programmatic institution of the concentration camps, that most uncanny and

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 10

difficult of all historical tragedies, is sufficiently linked to Nietzsche as a manifestation of his desire to rid the disease of the 'sick' from the culturally superior development of the 'healthy'. The camps are precisely the historical locus of all Nazi power, the space in which they breached an unforgivable boundary. The argument that Nietzsche would not have liquidated the Jews is not sufficient for vindicating his presence in this issue. For what disturbs us most about what happened in Nazi Germany isn't that a particular group of people named "German" tried to exterminate a race called "Jew", but that human beings took the lives and fates of other human beings into their hands on such a massive and hideously organized scale. By legitimating even the idea of human control and manipulation of life, Nietzsche burst asunder the most sacred section of human psychological flesh, opening wide the gates to Auschwitz.

The connection between Nietzsche and Nazism, although palpable in theory, is utterly diffuse and contentious in history. Therefore it is difficult to suggest some kind of causal historical role as the essence of this relationship. Instead, I would call the above-mentioned link a more abstract theoretical connection, yet one that penetrates to the essence of both the thinker and the movement and therefore establishes a more powerful relationship. It is utterly irrelevant that the Nazis misconstrued Nietzsche or that Nietzsche would have condemned the Nazi movement. The historical meaning of Nazism, as the programmatic decision on the experimentation and liquidation of life, contains significant resonance with Nietzsche's urgings and theories on life.

How now, we must ask, can Nietzsche be thought of in the context of a post-Auschwitz world? First, it is obvious that we must be intellectually vigilant when

engaging his discourse on life according to an immoral or a-moral perspective. Auschwitz teaches us the centrality of normative ethical boundaries in the growing atomization of society. In this way, Nietzsche's assertion that a philosophy of human legislation stands above the plane of "herd" morality is an irrefutably untenable position. If we have learned anything at all, it is to never go down those dark totalitarian pathways again.

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