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Nietzsche - An OverBeacon?

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PHIL 320

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During our class discussions, three major concerns regarding Nietzsche's master morality arose. First, it has been argued that master morality only works as long as there are no problems. An injury or disease will leave the Overman with nothing left to affirm. The second concern is that master morality blocks meaningful commitment. Since the Overman is living off his instincts and drives, he has no chance to commit to any bigger purpose or cause. The last concern is that master morality turns masters into isolated and lonely human beings. I strongly disagree with all three claims, and I will defend Nietzsche's vision of the Overman by showing that a) master morality still works for an injured master, b) that masters are able to commit to any purpose, and c) that masters are not lonely or isolated.

First, I would like to address the claim that master morality only works as long as the master is healthy. In *Nietzsche – Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Walter Kaufmann explains an underlying theme in Nietzsche's philosophy. "Nietzsche proposed to explain all human behavior in terms of the will to power (...)" (Kaufmann 216). Throughout his writings, Nietzsche stressed the importance of affirming life. If a master is injured or suffering from disease, then his master personality can still shine in its truest and brightest light. Especially when faced with injury or disease does the master differ from the herd. That's when it becomes clearest that he is so much more

powerful. He will not mop around or look for pity. No, a master shows his will to affirm life by recuperating and regaining his strength as soon as possible. An excellent example for an injured master can be found in Agnes Savill's *Alexander the Great and His Time*.

"In Persia, Alexander had suffered many injuries and periods of illness that affected his physical reserve. His skull had been so heavily hit by a stone that his sight had been impaired for a time; a bone in the leg had been splintered; his neck, shoulders, arms, ankle and body had received many wounds. (...) On several occasions (...) Alexander had been obliged to ride on, even to fight, while tortured with dysentery" (Savill 221).

This example shows that a master will always make the best of his situation, no matter how grim it might be.

Alexander the Great faced many dangers and always rose above them. This form of fatalism is a high and noble virtue for Nietzsche. In *Ecce Homo* he says, "My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati (...)" (*Ecce* 258). Robert Solomon explains Nietzsche's view on risk-taking in his book *What Nietzsche Really Said*.

"Nietzsche often writes about the temptations of 'living dangerously' (...) Taking risks requires accepting the consequences, and this sort of fatalism appeals to Nietzsche." They explain that "there is no doubt that Nietzsche took – and saw himself as taking – many risks in his writings, following his genius wherever it wanted to go. His first 'academic' book

was a conscientious flaunting of academic standards (...). His last books (... border on blasphemy and mania” (Solomon 186).

Thus, I can safely summarize that Nietzsche not only wants us to take risks, but that a true master personality will endure and overcome any injuries that arise along the way. A master will always try to reach his goals regardless of his physical condition.

Taking a danger of my own, I will now try to argue against the second claim that was made in class. Is a master really so caught up with his drives that he is incapable of committing to a higher purpose? Nietzsche doesn't seem to think so. In *Twilight of the Idols* he explains his idea of egoism to us. “The value of egoism depends on the physiological value of him who possess it: it can be very valuable, it can be worthless and contemptible” (Twilight 97). From this passage we can see that Nietzsche doesn't want us to follow our drives without a purpose. Solomon sheds more light on this passage.

“Suffice it to say that for Nietzsche [egoism] is not a vice but a virtue – yet it must be egoism properly understood, not as “selfishness” and not as a mere self-aggrandizement. (...) What is presupposed here is an utter rejection of altruism and self-interest. In a great soul, the satisfaction of self-interest *is* to the benefit of the greater good” (Solomon 185).

In his writings, Nietzsche gives us hints what such a purpose could be. “For what purpose humanity is there should not even concern us: why you are there, that you should ask yourself: and if you have no ready answer, then set for yourself goals, high and noble goals, and perish in pursuit of them! I know of no better life purpose than to perish in attempting the great and the impossible...” (Nachlass).

Thus, a master is fulfilling his destiny. He has been put into this world to achieve a goal. I will take Alexander the Great as an example. He followed the road he was destined to travel. He was courageous and brave, yet he showed pity and forgiveness when it suited his goals. Along the way he spread his empire, explored and connected the world, and left his legacy in history. For me, this is what master morality is all about. To thrive from one's own strength without letting anyone or anything interfere.

Let us imagine a teacher, grading feverishly to get the grades in by deadline. His office is hot and humid, sweat runs from brows, and his finger cramp harder with every grade he makes. This is a teacher suffering the injuries of teaching. No longer does he teach happily in class. No, isolated does he endure his pain. Every paper is a new rock that he needs to roll uphill – seemingly for an eternity. Well, if this teacher were not powered by the passion of teaching, then his endurance to grade would cease almost instantly. He would follow the herd and use scan sheets next time.

In summarizing this second argument, I understand master morality as such that someone is so in touch with his instincts, drives, desires, and goals that there is never a split-second doubt as to what one should do. Regardless of the circumstances, the master will always stride on for the benefit of all.

Likewise, I will stride on to the last concern of our class discussion. Are masters isolated and lonely? In *Beyond Good & Evil*, Nietzsche indicated that master individuals do not roam the world in isolation.

"Refraining mutually from injury, violence, and exploitation and placing one's will on a par with that of someone else - this may become, in a certain rough sense, good manners among individuals if the appropriate

conditions are present (name, if these men are actually similar in strength and value standards and belong in one body)" (Beyond 259).

This passage clearly indicates that master morality allows one to form connections with others as long as they are on the same level.

Such a group plays by certain set of rules though.

"Even the body within which individuals treat each other as equals (...) has to do to other bodies what the individuals within it refrain from doing to each other (...) it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant (...) because life simply is will to power" (Beyond 259).

Growing and becoming predominant do not indicate violence or barbarian will at work. For example, Solomon tells us that courtesy is another virtue that Nietzsche believes in.

"For those who entertain the thought of Nietzsche-as-barbarian (...) his emphasis on courtesy and politeness may come as something of a rude shock. But Nietzsche certainly regarded peaceful relations with others (...) as being of paramount importance. (...) Nietzsche contends that rudeness betrays lack of style, a lack of self-discipline, and a poverty of perspective" (Solomon 184).

Solomon quotes Nietzsche as saying

"[h]e who is of high rank would do well to furnish himself with a courteous memory: that is to say, to notice everything good about other people and after that to draw a line ... " (Solomon 184).

In addition, a noble master human can also help and take pity on others - as long as the action is self-affirming. By self-affirming, I do not mean harming another individual to establish one's own power, but to support and uphold one's character. Nietzsche writes that "the noble human being, too, helps the unfortunate, but not, or almost not, from pity, but prompted more by an urge begotten by excess of power" (Beyond 260). For example, a doctor can help others and affirm himself at the same time. It is his power and destiny to help others. Every time he helps, heals, or cures, he automatically self-affirms his character, power, and destiny. Like an injured warlord he can endure setbacks too. He might lose a patient, but like a true master, he will regain his confidence and strength to travel deeper into his fate.

An objection to my argument may be raised by saying that self-affirmation cannot be the basis for a real emotional connection. However, I dare to say that emotional connections, as we know them, are all based on self-affirmation. A man who enjoys spending time with his family would not do so, if he didn't confirm himself through such an act.

When a teacher helps a student, the teacher does so –ideally- out of genuine interest. But underlying this genuine interest is a subconscious affirmation of the teacher's character. A teacher with a mean and rude personality will treat the student accordingly. But a teacher with a friendly and outgoing personality will treat the student differently. Both teachers perform the same action, albeit somewhat differently, but they still affirm their characters and personalities.

The same argument can be made for Mother Teresa. Through her helping actions, she affirmed herself, her values, and her character.

He who enters into personal relationships without a strong foundation to do so, will most likely lose interest soon. And what better foundation can there be, but one's own character – one's own destiny? Thus, I hope to have shown that self-affirmation IS the basis for real emotional connections. Without it, they appear to be superficial and meaningless.

Summarizing, I think I have shown that it is not Nietzsche's intention to have a lonely and isolation Overman, who acts savagely from his desires, and shines only when he is well. Quite on the contrary, while the Overman cherishes solitude, he fights for high and noble goals. Facing the dangers of being misunderstood and abused, he still stands like beacon surrounded by the herd, guiding society with his shining rays of power and hope.

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