

Nietzsche and the Crisis of Modernity

Nietzsche diagnoses a particular conflict between our will to truth and our will to meaning which he claims constitutes the central crisis of modernity. The will to truth prevent us from constructing the types of mythological narratives (for instance narratives of divine creation and God's providential plan) which formerly served to give meaning to existence; hence the need to find existence meaningful remains unfulfilled. This leaves us with two possibilities: Dispense with the demand for existential meaning or create new narratives that can somehow either evade or be reconciled with the demands of the will to truth.

Part I: The Problem of Meaning

1. The Secular Theodicy Reading

Daniel Came and others have argued that Nietzsche may usefully be seen as attempting throughout his career to reconcile the following claims:

- A. The world inevitably contains a preponderance of suffering over happiness
- B. The world is a worthy object of affirmation

This is a reading that emphasises Nietzsche as responding to Schopenhauer.

2. Arguments against the Secular Theodicy Reading

The Temporality Problem: Nietzsche seems to characterize himself as the diagnostician of a problem that is particular to modernity, a problem that only comes properly into focus with the death of (belief in) God. But the problem of suffering is, as Schopenhauer puts it, not time specific – suffering is an inevitable consequence of (human) nature.

Textual Problem 1: Nietzsche explicitly says that man's problem is not suffering but the meaninglessness of suffering.

[H]e [man] did not know how to justify, explain, affirm himself: **he suffered from the problem of his meaning**. He suffered otherwise as ill, he was for the most part a *diseased* animal; but **the suffering itself was not his problem**, rather that the answer was missing to the scream of his question: "*to what end suffering?*" Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* negate suffering, he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a meaning for it, a to-this-end of suffering. **The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse thus far stretched over humanity**. (GM III 28 - italics indicates Nietzsche's emphasis, bold indicates my emphasis).

Textual Problem 2: In much of his work from the beginning to the end Nietzsche references Wager much more than Schopenhauer. For instance in his last book where he is summing up his work and achievements he mentions Schopenhauer 17 times and Wagner 78 times.

Wagner, like the Romantics (e.g. Hölderlin), was exercised primarily by the problem of meaning and not the problem of suffering

3. The Romantic Reading

A: Our will to truth precludes us from believing those illusions which are necessary to give life meaning.

B: We have a basic need to find life meaningful.

This romantic reading explains why Nietzsche is a philosopher of the problem of modernity; it is he who thematises the claim that with the loss of God we eventually come to lose meaning.

4. A Refinement of the need for meaning thesis: The Descriptive Versus Normative Reading

The quotation from GM III 28 above might suggest that Nietzsche has an essentialist claim that man is the animal that needs to find existential meaning.

The generic problem is that generally Nietzsche seems to resist all kind of essentialism.

The particular problem is that Nietzsche allows that there is a kind of human, one he calls “the last man” who rejects the call for existential meaning:

There will come a time when man will no longer launches the arrow of his longing beyond man....."What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?"—so asks the last man and blinks. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, 4

Actually, Nietzsche does not think it is part of human nature to seek meaning but rather he believes that humans should seek a meaning beyond themselves:

[t]he individual must be consecrated to something higher than himself..." (*Untimely Meditations* IV – Richard Wagner in Bayreuth

Why? Otherwise he is small and ugly like the last man. Is it ultimately an aesthetic criterion.?

5. Meaning and Myth

Nietzsche again following the romantics and Wagner believes that what gives a culture and a people unity – unity being a pre-requisite for higher culture:

without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. (BT 24)

Culture [Kultur] – the rule of art over life.” (NF 1872 19[310]). “This proposition must be established: we live only through illusions [Illusionen]

It is myth that provides a normative framework of meaning.

Part II: The Problem of the Will to Truth

6. Will to truth and the Death of God

In *The Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche argues that the Christian will to truth eventually comes to pronounce a negative judgment on belief in God:

[The] two thousand year discipline in truth..in the end forbids itself the lie involved in belief in God...All great things perish thorough themselves...Christianity as dogma [theism] perished through its own morality [the categorical value of truth] ... GM III 27

In the famous death of God passage (GS 125) Nietzsche claims that the full meaning of the death of God has not reached us:

This prodigious event is still on its way, and is traveling - it has not yet reached men's ears. Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest star - and yet they have done it themselves!"

Nietzsche's claim here is that while many modern Europeans no longer believe in God they still ascribe to values that were originally justified through the posit of God. The two most fundamental such values are 1) The value of compassion and 2) the categorical value of truth.

Nietzsche claims that when the when we truly appreciate the death of God we will be left with nihilism: the absence of all categorical values.

7. The Will to Truth and Science

In GM Essay 3 section 23 Nietzsche argues that our modern secular scientific worldview is not really a counter-ideal to what he calls the religious ascetic world view, even though it takes itself to be such a counter-ideal.

Where is the counterpart to this closed system [of the religious ascetic ideal] ?... I am told it is not lacking...modern science.. as a true philosophy of reality... has leant to get along without God, the beyond....Precisely he opposite of what is claimed here is the truth...[science] is not the opposite of that ascetic ideal but rather its most recent and noblest form

This is because it still gives a categorical value to truth:

This unconditional will to truth is belief in the ascetic ideal (GM III 2400

Nietzsche argues that the categorical value of truth a) has a genealogical basis in theism and b) can only have justificatory basis in theism.

8. Can Science Justify The Categorical Value of Truth?

Note science can justify a hypothetical value to truth. Thus one can give an evolutionary account both as a casual account of our valuing of truth and as an account of hypothetical/instrumental value; truth is valuable for promoting our prospects of survival.

But note this does not justify the claim that truth has a categorical value. Indeed consider the two claims:

Hypothetical: Truth is valuable to the end of survival

Categorical: Truth is valuable as an end in itself.

Only the former can itself have any status as a scientific claim.

For Nietzsche the categorical value of Truth is itself the last myth of the ascetic ideal:

Christianity as morality must now also perish...Now that Christian truthfulness has drawn one conclusion after the other, in the end it draws its strongest conclusion, its conclusion against itself (GM III 27)

9. Modernity and Nihilism

Once we have dispensed with the last great myth/illusion Nietzsche thinks we will have truly appreciated the death of God and we will fall into nihilism, the rejection of all categorical values. This leaves us with two possibilities: 1) We remain without categorical values and become last men; or, 2) We forge new categorical value, new myths (the Romantic solution).

Nietzsche himself attempts to create a myth of the ultimate value of high culture and the Great individuals (men of Genius). Partly because he thinks this myth requires no strong metaphysical postulates that our will to truth can attack, but also because he takes this ideal to be aesthetically pleasing.