

Nietzsche I

PHIL410

In General

- Nietzsche is an important figure in philosophy for a number of reasons. One is that he represents the end of Modernity and the beginnings of Post-Modernism. Prior to Nietzsche, philosophically, it is possible to believe in objective truth, a rationally intelligible world, and the soundness of scientific and moral principles. After him, these things fall into question. To be sure, the methods and principles of Modernism persist; but their influence is no longer universal among scholars and intellectuals. And, of course, Nietzsche is not the only representative of this view, nor the first. But he is perhaps its most vivid and best known.
- Nietzsche was a trained philologist as well as a philosopher. He is thus aware of the ancient and classical roots of 19th Century intellectual problems and of their historical development. Because of his classical background, and also because of broad cultural and intellectual developments of the 19th Century, Nietzsche is also aware of the social significance of philosophical and scientific ideas. Primary among these are the development of evolutionary biology and the rise of linguistic, anthropological, archaeological, and psychological sciences. Consequently, Nietzsche's work draws upon relationships among language, thought, physiology, and society.
- Nietzsche's style, as mentioned in the study guide, is famously brash, brilliant, and self-conscious, and it is notoriously enigmatic. As he suggests in §381, this is as much a matter of necessity as of preference. His topics are logically difficult, psychologically deep, and complex – a quick dip is perhaps all he, and we, can manage. This, of course, makes for interpretative challenges, as his presentation is not systematic.
- The psychological and emotional impact of his work should not be neglected, inescapable as it is. Nietzsche's work is provocative and, as one commentator puts it, he wears masks – it is not always clear exactly what he is saying, or why he is saying it in such an enigmatic and passionate manner. However, I think that he is best read as (trying to be) exceedingly honest (cf. §2), if, like the rest of us, he is sometimes carried away and if, inevitably, we cannot avoid wearing masks. It is a tragedy, and not a little ironic, that he lost his sanity towards the end of his life.

The Death of God thesis

- Nietzsche's famous pronouncement at §125 (cf. §§108, 343) signifies several things. First, that belief in God as a conscious, personal object is no longer intellectually tenable. This is owing to scientific and intellectual developments of the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries. The rise of the empirical sciences has demonstrated the true dimensions of the spatiotemporal world. Historical, archaeological, and anthropological developments have taught us the origin and nature of religious texts and doctrines. And as Freud will shortly reveal, the nascent psychological science demonstrates certain of the origins of religious thought in our psychology. No less significant is the philosophical conclusion, culminating in Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, that the classic arguments for the existence of God fail completely.
- Second, the intellectual significance of this "event" is tremendous, as is foreshadowed in §124. The notion of a rational, all-knowing god overseeing the world and our

activities constitutes an intellectual “horizon” – a reference point and guarantor of Truth, Order, and Justice. Without such a guarantee, we are intellectually disoriented, “continually plunging,” and must determine for ourselves such truth and meaning as we can. It turns out that these are difficult to find and justify. This is not to say that there are or can be none. But we cannot simply presume them to exist; and once we begin to examine both those we have employed and such as we may find, we discover that we are quite alone and in the dark, intellectually and morally speaking.

- See, in this connection, §109, where he warns against attributing order to the universe. And compare §346 where Nietzsche scoffs at the assumption of a rational world order, and poses the question how to formulate rules to live by absent such an order.
- Note the influence of Kant, here, whose Copernican Revolution has turned the epistemological tables from a truth-finding paradigm to a truth-making paradigm.
- Third, the moral dimension of this intellectual problem is particularly troubling, but also, Nietzsche thinks, potentially liberating. If our moral laws are nothing but of our own devising, then they cannot be understood as Eternal or Divine truths. This makes our moral laws and observances our own responsibility: we should think of them as our most important tools for self-development.
 - See §§4, 19, 21, 26, 116-118, and 345, e.g., in which Nietzsche describes the evolving sociological role of moral codes. The evolutionary theme is particularly important, here, since it gives the lie to any notion of One Truth, suggesting, instead, a biological interpretation of morality, as a crucial and evolving element of human survival.
 - As the conclusion of §346 suggests, however, we face a paradox in deciding which rules to live by: the very notion of choosing a moral code tends to undermine that code’s authority. This is because the notion of choice is incompatible with the normative force of a moral law, which takes the form of a categorical imperative. Our condition is thus vexed: we have little choice but to live by some set of moral judgments: the very act of choosing implies an evaluation. A kind of intellectual double-vision results, whose best antidote is perhaps forgetfulness (with which we are happily well-equipped). See also §§382 and 383.

Knowledge and Biology

- logic, geometry, and reason - §§110, 111, 112, 115
- truth, untruth - §§110, 111, 121
- interpretation, ideas, and sensation - §§57, 58, 59, 355, 374

Connections

- to Kant
- to Descartes and Hume
- to Plato