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## THE MORAL CHALLENGES OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S NIHILISM

### 7 Theses

#### *1: Nihilism as a Loss of all Orientation*

Nihilism – for Nietzsche the devaluation of the highest values and all values dependent on them – concerns, as a last consequence, all distinctions by which we structure (our) reality. They stabilize our orientation, as far as they evaluate, such as preferring truth over untruth, certainty over uncertainty, morality over immorality etc. If these values are devaluated, (“Granted that we want truth: *why not rather untruth?*” BGE 1), then our orientation loses all foothold, we get completely disoriented. Distinctions of objects we hold on to on a daily basis also have an evaluating character. The value lies in the objectification of objects, their firmness and resistance, their permanence and stability. If objects become fluid, unstable, untenable (“The form is fluid, the ‘meaning’ even more so...”, GM II 12), all hold is lost as well. In terms of the philosophy of orientation, the last consequence of nihilism is a complete loss of orientation, a complete disorientation.

#### *2: Orientation as Will to Power*

Loss of orientation is for beings of orientation – beings that can and have to orientate themselves – unbearable and even unimaginable. Orientation is the first and most urgent need for all living beings. Everything else, even nutrition or sex or finding a place to sleep, already presupposes orientation. Whatever is able and in need to orientate itself has alternatives to its behavior about which it can decide on its own within a certain leeway; despite various other dependencies, in this regard it acts autonomously. Orientation is the accomplishment to find one’s way in a situation by detecting opportunities for actions in order to cope with or “master” a situation (as one says in German “bewältigen” or “beherrschen”). To cope with a situation or to master it means – if put it in another way – to win power over a situation. The fundamental need for orientation is initially – as Nietzsche put it – a “‘Will to Power’” (BGE 36).

### 3: *Moralities as Power Relations*

The greatest challenge for our orientation is orientating towards others who are equally able to orientate themselves, also within a certain leeway of different decidable options for behavior. Their behavior is the most difficult to anticipate. It continually poses new problems for orientation making it challenging to hold on to them. This is where moralities originate (Nietzsche uses the plural) – as a bundle of expectations of others to act in a way so that one is able to rely on them. If these expectations become familiar and lasting for those that can and have to live together, then “relations of supremacy” develop which soothe down and reassure the always restless orientations (BGE 19). Such power relations are the most persistent when they are internalized: when everyone on one’s accord believes in them that no more means of coercion or of violence are necessary in order for all or most of them to follow these expectations. For Nietzsche, also morality is to be understood through the perspective of power: if free of coercion and violence, then it is all the more powerful (GM II).

### 4: *Reciprocal Rearing to Decisiveness and Reliability*

Holding on to others is only possible, if they are reliable. Therefore, the first moral demand is reliability. A reliable person is somebody, who sticks to his or her decisions or who has the prerogative “to promise” (GM II 1). We expect from others that they do not redecide on decisions they have made, hence we expect decisiveness. Decisiveness allows for predictability, and predictability allows for expectations on others in the first place. If expectations on others are satisfied they allow for a foothold in orientation. If someone proves to be irresolute, unreliable and unpredictable, then this person is morally sanctioned, if possible, by being excluded. This is how we rear each other consistently and rigorously to be able to make promises (Nietzsche calls this “rearing and educating”, BGE 203). This rearing establishes power, the dominance of a morality.

### 5: *The Structuring of Flexible Moralities by Norms and Values*

Expectations can be disappointed. Others can act differently than expected. Holding on to other orientations in one’s orientation is always precarious. Hence, one tries to establish expectations that resist disappointment. Expectations that resist disappointments are norms. The foothold in norms is not impaired by being occasionally violated. ‘Thou shalt not lie’ is still in effect even and especially if people lie; only if a norm is continually violated by many

without punishment, it does not lend support anymore. Moral norms are usually not specifically defined; they rather develop through praxis in life. In this way, always new firm norms can come into play and nevertheless can still stay in motion ("fluid"). This is how they can keep up with the times and adjust to new circumstances. For this adjustment, the semantics of values was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which made Nietzsche famous. Values can be diverse, not all have to be shared by everyone; one is able to orientate oneself towards them interchangeably and they themselves might change or be replaced. If norms are oriented towards values, a moral foothold develops for a certain time, as a flexible stability. Flexible stability is both needed and sufficient for orientation. It cannot and must not want more than this because it needs to deal with time itself.

#### *6: Nihilistic Fixation of Morality by Paul the Apostle*

As far as Nietzsche defied to the "Revaluation of all Values" (GM III 27), he pushed forward the concept of movable moralities: not eternal, but always new "tablets" (Za III, On Old and New Tablets). The delineation of concepts of what might be called 'immoral' now and 'moral' at a later time, or vice versa, becomes fluent. What is regarded as 'immoral' now, might over time become "life-furthering, life-preserving" (BGE 4) just as much as what we regard now as being 'moral'. The change of moralities opens new leeway to specifically "create values". Nietzsche regarded this as the "peculiar right of masters" (BGE 261). For him, "masters" become "masters" just by being able to create values; if they are able to do this, one also acknowledges their "right" for it. Nietzsche's most striking example for such a creator of values in history is Paul the apostle, who fixed Jesus' model of an "evangelical way of life" into dogmas (AC 33), by which the world could be missionized. At first Europe, but then also large parts of the world obtained a strong foothold for millennia, but only by perverting and denying the "being that is floating in symbols and incomprehensibilities" which Nietzsche discovered the "type of Jesus" to live in (AC 31). By the morality Paul created, he only covered nihilism and perpetuated it in a different form.

## 7: A Challenging Opening of Morality towards Nihilism

The challenge of nihilism is, however, to create or admit a morality which does not belie it, but which is able to cope with it by keeping open the decidability for every norm and every value that is brought into play. This requires a "pathos of distance" (BGE 257) also and especially when dealing with one's own morality which we preferably dogmatize in a way that we get off in the best possible way ("Everyone desires that no dogmas or evaluation of things are in force than those by which he [or she] gets of well" Nachlass 1885/86, 2[168], KSA 12.152). The "pathos of distance" however is a "longing for an ever new widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, further, more extended, more comprehensive states, in short, just the elevation of the type 'man', the continued 'self-surmounting of man', to use a moral formula in a supermoral sense" (BGE 257). In short, nihilism requires increased, more complex abilities of orientation. They allow for a reflexive morality: a morality in dealing with moralities, which frees us to be able to consider other moralities – which regard different things as good or bad than oneself does – not as bad as a whole. Precisely this could be the meaning of Jesus' demand of "Do not resist an evil!" (Mt 5:39). Whoever is capable of this, would be for Nietzsche an "autonomous supra-moral individual" (GM II 2), an individual who easily fulfills the commandments of the customs and morals of his or her living environment, and who at the same time has gone beyond this by being able to decide autonomously – by 'self-legislation' – on new moral values, relying on his or her own responsibility while knowing that these values are not just given and that they hence have come out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. For Nietzsche, this is the "proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*" (GM II 2).

Translation Reinhard Müller and Werner Stegmaier, translation of Nietzsche's text by Carol Diethe, H.L. Mencken, Helen Zimmern and ourselves.

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