

Nietzsche on the Jews

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Philosophers, as a rule, are a rather low-key bunch. They generally discuss mundane, technical, or utterly abstract topics that cause little concern among society at large. Of course there were exceptions, primarily during the Renaissance when the early humanists incurred the wrath of the Church (think of Bruno or Spinoza); this required some to publish their works either pseudonymously or posthumously. And Marx and Engels have certainly garnered their fair share of enmity. But by and large philosophers throughout the ages have raised few serious hackles.

A major exception is the case of Friedrich Nietzsche, certainly one of the most controversial philosophers in history. The epitome of non-political-correctness, Nietzsche clearly did not give a damn about whom he might offend. He was on a mission to uncover the fundamental flaws in Western society, to expose hypocrisy and moral corruption, and to undermine every aspect of degenerate modern society. Only by getting to the root of the problem, he thought, could we find our way forward—a path to the greatness that is human destiny

The sad state of modern life, he said, is a consequence of the overturning of classical values that occurred in the early post-Christian world. These classic values—originating in ancient Greece and embraced by the Romans—emphasized strength, robustness, nobility, self-determination, and personal excellence. These life-affirming values, the ‘master’ or ‘aristocratic’ values, were the foundation upon which the great civilizations of Athens and Rome were built.

One consequence of this development was the powerful and expansive Roman Empire. It reached Palestine by the year 60 b.c., and held that territory for over five hundred years, until the fall of the Western Empire in 476 (though the Eastern, or Byzantine, Empire continued on much longer). During this time, Nietzsche claimed, the oppression felt by the Jews and early Christians grew to the point at which a new value system—the Judeo-Christian value system—came into being, as a kind of religious and ethical response to Roman domination. Though a single unified system, it carried different emphases for the two groups. For Jews the focus was on self-pity, ethnic cohesion, a thirst for revenge, an obsession with freedom, a hatred of the strong and powerful, and a desire to recover lost wealth. The Christians—through the figure of Jesus—preferred to emphasize the value of the down-trodden (“blessed are the meek”), faith in God to bring justice (“the meek shall inherit the earth”), salvation in the afterlife, and a fixation on love as a means for ameliorating suffering. Arising as it did out of the quasi-slavery imposed by the Romans, Nietzsche deemed this collective Judeo-Christian response a ‘slave’ or ‘priestly’ morality.

When the Western Empire, based in Rome, collapsed in the 5th century a.d., the master morality collapsed with it. As the only real competitor, slave morality rose to take its place as the dominant ethical system of the West. And there it has remained for nearly two thousand years. In this sense, Nietzsche says, the slave has defeated the master, and become the new master.

But the actual outcome has been far from positive. Quite the contrary: it has been an absolute disaster for humanity. When combined with booming populations and advancing technology, there now exists a distinctly modern form of the priestly mindset, one based on subservience, conformity, equality, pity, guilt, suffering, revenge, and self-hatred: the *herd morality*. One could scarcely devise a lower conception of man.

Which brings us to the question of the Jews. Nietzsche's position on the Jews is complex and decidedly mixed. On the one hand, they are the embodiment and product of the despised slave morality. Jews owe their very success to the promotion and exploitation of this way of thinking. On the other hand, they *did succeed*: they 'defeated' (or rather, outlived) Rome, and thus were able to successfully pull off that inversion of values in which the slave eclipsed the master. Partly for this very reason they have been able to sustain themselves as a distinct ethnicity through the millennia. They are hardened survivors; they are (relatively) pure; they know how to succeed.

We see this ambivalent attitude in an early work, *Human, All Too Human* (1878). In a brief discussion of "the problem of the Jews," Nietzsche shows evident sympathy with their suffering: "I would like to know how much one must excuse in the overall accounting of a people which, not without guilt on all our parts, has had the most sorrowful history of all peoples" (sec. 475). In a brief moment of praise—and in noted contrast to later writings—he hails the contributions of the Jews; they are the ones "to whom we owe the noblest human being (Christ), the purest philosopher (Spinoza), the mightiest book, and the most effective moral code in the world." This would be virtually his last unconditional praise for Jesus and the Bible.

The same passage, however, includes this observation: "Every nation, every man has disagreeable, even dangerous characteristics; it is cruel to demand that the Jew should be an exception." And there is no doubt that he is disagreeable: "the youthful Jew of the stock exchange is the most repugnant invention of the whole human race." (Given our recent financial meltdown, bank bailouts, and the Madoff scandal, I think many would concur today.)

Nietzsche's next book, *Daybreak* (1881), offers conditional praise for the Jews based on their long history of exclusion, isolation, and persecution. "As a consequence of this [history], the psychological and spiritual resources of the Jews today are extraordinary" (sec. 205). They are capable of the "coldest self-possession, ... the subtlest outwitting and exploitation of chance and misfortune." Thus, mental acuity is of prime importance: "They are so sure in their intellectual suppleness and shrewdness that they never, even in the worst straits, need to earn their bread by physical labor." Still, "their souls have never known chivalrous noble sentiments."

But they do have a plan for Europe:

[S]ince they are unavoidably going to ally themselves with the best aristocracy of Europe more and more with every year that passes, they will soon have created for themselves a goodly inheritance of spiritual and bodily demeanor: so that a century hence they will appear sufficiently noble not to make those they dominate *ashamed* to have them as masters. And that is what matters! ... Europe may fall into their hands like a ripe fruit, if they would only just extend them.

In fact, as we know, it turned out to be *America* that fell into their hands, "like a ripe fruit."

The one other relevant passage in *Daybreak*, from section 377, introduces the important concept of Jewish hatred: "It is where our deficiencies lie that we indulge in our enthusiasms. The command 'love your enemies!' had to be invented by the Jews, the best haters there have ever been..." The (Judeo-) Christian commandment of love, Nietzsche thought, grew directly from the hatred of the enslaved Jews, as a kind of mask or cover. Perhaps even more than this—as a kind of deliberate deception. A 'bad hater' wears his anger on his sleeve, for all to see. A 'good hater' hides it inside. But the 'best' plots revenge using the very opposite—an image of divine love—as cover. "Even if you think of us as enemies," the Jews might say, "*love us anyway*. This is God's command." This whole idea, only hinted at here, would lie dormant for some six years; it reemerges strongly in his 1887 masterpiece *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

After *Daybreak* there was a long five year stretch in which Nietzsche did not address the Jewish problem in any substantial way. *The Gay Science* (parts 1–4) focused instead on the nature of science, on power, and on the 'death of God.' His other book of this period, the famous piece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, contained no reference to it.

But by 1886, with the release of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he had returned to the topic. Again his language is mixed. He praises the Old Testament: “In the Jewish ‘Old Testament,’ the book of divine justice, there are human beings, things, and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare with it” (sec. 52). (In fact it was precisely this style that he duplicated so effectively in his *Zarathustra*.) Europeans are furthermore indebted to the Jews for their high conception of ethics: “What Europe owes to the Jews? Many things, good and bad, and above all one thing that is of the best and of the worst: the grand style in morality, the terribleness and majesty of infinite demands, infinite meanings” (sec. 250).

In part from this debt, and in part from their example as a tough, coherent, enduring race, the Jews should be allowed a role in Europe, Nietzsche thought. In section 251 he decries the “anti-Jewish [stupidity]” of the times. “I have not met a German yet who was well disposed toward the Jews.” The common feeling — “that Germany has amply *enough* Jews” — was clearly holding sway. But the Jews need to be given due consideration, for their influence is not insignificant:

A thinker who has the development of Europe on his conscience will...take into account the Jews as well as the Russians as the provisionally surest and most probable factors in the great play and fight of forces. ... That the Jews, if they wanted it...*could* even now have preponderance, indeed quite literally mastery over Europe, that is certain; that they are *not* working and planning for that is equally certain.

I would remind the reader at this point of the considerable influence that Jews in fact had in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their population hovered around one percent of the total during this time, but they were significantly overrepresented in a number of important fields. Sarah Gordon (*Hitler, Germans, and the Jewish Question*; 1984) provides some relevant statistics.

They were overrepresented in business, commerce, and public and private service... These characteristics were already evident in the Middle Ages and appeared in the census data as early as 1843. ... Jews were also influential in joint-stock corporations, the stock market, the insurance industry, and legal and economic consulting firms. Before the First World War, for example, Jews occupied 13 percent of the directorships of joint-stock corporations and 24

percent of the supervisory positions within these corporations. ... [D]uring 1904 they comprised 27 percent of all lawyers, 10 percent of all apprenticed lawyers, 5 percent of court clerks, 4 percent of magistrates, and up to 30 percent of all higher ranks of the judiciary. ... Jews were [also] overrepresented among university professors and students between 1870 and 1933. For example, in 1909-1910... almost 12 percent of instructors at German universities were Jewish... [I]n 1905-1906 Jewish students comprised 25 percent of the law and medical students... The percentage of Jewish doctors was also quite high, especially in large cities, where they sometimes were a majority. ... [I]n Berlin around 1890, 25 percent of all children attending grammar school were Jewish... (pp. 10-14)

Jewish influence was thus no idle matter.

“Meanwhile,” Nietzsche continues, “they want and wish rather...to be absorbed and assimilated by Europe...; and this bent and impulse...should be noted well and *accommodated*: to that end it might be useful and fair to expel the anti-Semitic screamers from the country.” Again, he sees the Jews as useful examples of racial toughness and coherence. And more importantly, they hold an important lesson in the creation of new value systems as a means of overcoming adversity, and exerting power. The typical German anti-Semite does not understand this; he just hates all Jews and wants to get rid of them. For Nietzsche, they are detestable but also useful and instructive. A truly strong German nation could easily accommodate a percent or two of Jews.

Nietzsche is emphatic that the value of the Jews and Jewish morality is purely educational; it is not to be emulated. He elaborates in section 195:

The Jews have brought off that miraculous feat of an inversion of values, thanks to which life on earth has acquired a novel and dangerous attraction for a couple of millennia. ... Their prophets... were the first to use the word ‘world’ as a term of contempt. This inversion of values...constitutes the significance of the Jewish people: they mark the beginning of the slave rebellion in morals.

The ‘inversion’—the defeat of the classic Greek/Roman values—was a remarkable accomplishment, and if we are now to move beyond the priestly Jewish slave values, we will need to perform yet another such act. Only by thoroughly understanding the

previous inversion can we hope to accomplish the next.

The year after *Beyond Good and Evil* was an exceptionally busy and productive one. In addition to keeping continuous notebook entries — many of which would later become part of *The Will to Power* — Nietzsche wrote an important fifth chapter for his earlier book *The Gay Science*, and published one of his greatest works, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

Part 5 of *Gay Science* includes two relevant entries. First is a laudatory passage on the Jewish love of logic and analysis. “All of [the Jewish scholars] have a high regard for logic, that is, for compelling agreement by force of reasons... For nothing is more democratic than logic; it is no respecter of persons and makes no distinction between crooked and straight noses” (sec. 348). This has been a real benefit to all: “Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making people think more logically and for establishing *cleaner* intellectual habits...”

As to their cultural influence, their presence in stage, theater, and press, Nietzsche offers the following thoughts:

As for the *Jews*, the people who possess the art of adaptability par excellence, [my line of argument] suggests immediately that one might see them virtually as a world-historical arrangement for the production of actors, a veritable breeding ground for actors. And it really is time to ask: What good actor today is *not* — a Jew? The Jew as a born *Litterat* [‘man of letters’], as the true master of the European press, also exercises his power by virtue of his theatrical gifts; for the man of letters is essentially an actor: he plays the ‘expert,’ the ‘specialist.’ (sec. 361)

In *Genealogy*, Nietzsche begins to write in more overtly racial tones, speaking of the “blond Aryan” as the “master race,” or the “conqueror race.” On one occasion he again dismisses those who do not see instructive value in the Jews: “I also do not like these latest speculators in idealism, the anti-Semites, who today roll their eyes in a Christian-Aryan-bourgeois manner and exhaust one’s patience by trying to rouse up all the horned-beast elements in people...” (III, sec. 26). But on the other hand, the Jews and their morality come in for severe criticism—not because of their ability to succeed, but because of *what they inherently are*:

You will have already guessed how easily the *priestly* [i.e. Jewish] way of evaluating can split from the knightly-aristocratic, and then continue to develop into its opposite. ... The knightly-aristocratic judgments of value have as their basic assumption a powerful physicality, a blooming, rich, even overflowing health, together with those things required to maintain these qualities—war, adventure, hunting, dancing, war games, and, in general, everything which involves strong, free, happy action. The priestly method of evaluating has, as we saw, other preconditions... As is well known, priests are the *most evil of enemies*—but why? Because they are the most powerless. From their powerlessness, their hate grows among them into something huge and terrifying, to the most spiritual and most poisonous manifestations. The truly great haters in world history have always been priests...

Let us briefly consider the greatest example. Everything on earth which has been done against “the noble,” “the powerful,” “the masters,” “the rulers” is not worth mentioning in comparison with what *the Jews* have done against them: the Jews, that priestly people, who knew how to get final satisfaction from their enemies and conquerors through a radical transformation of their values, that is, through an act of the *most spiritual revenge*. This was appropriate only to a priestly people with the most deeply repressed priestly desire for revenge. In opposition to the aristocratic value equations (*good = noble = powerful = beautiful = fortunate = loved by god*), the Jews, with an awe-inspiring consistency, dared to reverse things and to hang on to that with the teeth of the most profound hatred (the hatred of the powerless), that is, to “only those who suffer are good; the poor, the powerless, the low are the only good people; the suffering, those in need, the sick, the ugly are also the only pious people; only they are blessed by God; for them alone there is salvation.—By contrast, you privileged and powerful people, you are for all eternity the evil, the cruel, the lecherous, the insatiable, the godless; you will also be the unblessed, the cursed, and the damned for all eternity!”

In connection with that huge and immeasurably disastrous initiative which the Jews launched with this most fundamental of all declarations of war, I recall the sentence I wrote at another time—

namely, that with the Jews *the slave revolt in morality begins...* (I, sec. 7)

The means by which this revolt was carried out was—*Christianity*. Christian ‘love,’ according to Nietzsche, is little more than the “triumphant crown” of the Jewish tree of hatred. This love acted “in pursuit of the goals of that hatred — victory, spoil, and seduction — by the same impulse that drove the roots of that hatred deeper and deeper...into all that was profound and evil” (sec. 7). “What is certain,” he adds, is that under the sign of Christianity, “Israel, with its vengefulness and revaluation of all values, has hitherto triumphed again and again over all other ideals, over all *nobler* ideals.”

After some two thousand years, this process continues, slowly but surely:

The ‘redemption’ of the human race [from the classical master values] is going forward; everything is visibly becoming Judaized, Christianized, mob-ized (what do the words matter!). The progress of this poison through the entire body of mankind seems irresistible, its pace and tempo may from now on even grow slower, subtler, less audible, more cautious—there is plenty of time. (sec. 9)

Until we grasp this poisoning of modern man, we have no hope of liberating ourselves and attaining our higher destiny.

The many notebook entries that make up *The Will to Power* are difficult to interpret, both because the writings are a scattershot of ideas and observations, and also because these were never intended by Nietzsche to be published. They appeared in book form only after his death, at the behest of his sister. Still, we find a number of passages that are consistent with his published views, particularly on the subject at hand.

As usual, he writes in both laudatory and critical language. In section 175 we read:

The reality upon which Christianity could be raised was the little Jewish family of the Diaspora, with its warmth and affection, with its readiness to help and sustain one another... To have recognized in this a form of power, to have recognized that this blissful condition was communicable, seductive, infectious to pagans also—that was [St.] Paul’s genius.

Nietzsche is sympathetic with the few remaining 'noble-valued' Germans, and understands their "present instinctive aversion to Jews: it is the hatred of the free and self-respecting orders for those who are pushing, and who combine timid and awkward gestures with an absurd opinion of their [own] worth" (sec. 186). Later he elaborates on this "Jewish instinct of the 'chosen'," in which the Jews "claim all the virtues for themselves without further ado, and count the rest of the world their opposites; a profound sign of a vulgar soul" (sec. 197). And if one thing is certain, it is that the Jews are, in some sense, deeply untrustworthy:

People of the basest origin, in part rabble, outcasts not only from good but also from respectable society, raised away from even the smell of culture, without discipline, without knowledge, without the remotest suspicion that there is such a thing as conscience in spiritual matters; simply—Jews: with an instinctive ability to create an advantage, a means of seduction out of every superstitious supposition... When Jews step forward as innocence itself, then the danger is great. (sec. 199)

Nietzsche's overall view on Judaism and its Christian offshoot is nicely summarized in this passage from *Genealogy*:

Let's bring this to a conclusion. The two *opposing* values "good and bad," "good and evil" have fought a fearful battle on earth for thousands of years. ... The symbol of this battle, written in a script which has remained legible through all human history up to the present, is called "Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome." To this point there has been no greater event than *this* war, *this* posing of a question, *this* contradiction between deadly enemies. Rome felt that the Jew was like something contrary to nature itself, its monstrous polar opposite, as it were. In Rome the Jew was considered "*guilty* of hatred against the entire human race." And that view was correct, to the extent that we are right to link the health and the future of the human race to the unconditional rule of aristocratic values, the Roman values.

By contrast, how did the Jews feel about Rome? We can guess that from a thousand signs, but it is sufficient to treat ourselves again to

the Apocalypse of St. John, that wildest of all written outbursts which vengeance has on its conscience...

The Romans were indeed strong and noble men, stronger and nobler than any people who had lived on earth up until then or even than any people who had ever been dreamed up. Everything they left as remains, every inscription, is delightful, provided that we can guess *what* is doing the writing there. By contrast, the Jews were *par excellence* that priestly people of *ressentiment*, who possessed an unparalleled genius for popular morality...

Which of them has *proved victorious* for the time being, Rome or Judea? Surely there's not the slightest doubt. Just think of who it is that people bow down to today in Rome itself, as the personification of all the highest values—and not only in Rome, but in almost half the earth, all the places where people have become merely tame or want to become tame—in front of *three Jews*, as we know, and *one Jewess* (in front of Jesus of Nazareth, the fisherman Peter, the carpet maker Paul, and the mother of the first-mentioned Jesus, named Mary). This is very remarkable: without doubt Rome has been conquered. (I, 16)

I close with a final passage from one of Nietzsche's last works, *The Anti-Christ* (1888). As expected, religious themes dominate this book, and of particular interest are his comments on the origin of Christianity from its Jewish foundation. One can do little better than let Nietzsche speak for himself:

The Jews are the most remarkable nation of world history because, faced with the question of being or not being, they preferred ... being *at any price*: the price they had to pay was the radical *falsification* of all nature, all naturalness, all reality, the entire inner world as well as the outer. ... Considered psychologically, the Jewish nation is a nation of the toughest vital energy which ... took the side of all *décadence* instincts—not as being dominated by them but because it divined in them a power by means of which one can prevail *against* 'the world.' The Jews are the counterparts of *décadents*: they have been compelled to *act as décadents* to the point of illusion.... [T]his kind of man has a life-interest in making mankind *sick*, and in inverting the concepts of 'good' and 'evil,' 'true' and 'false' in a

mortally dangerous and world-maligning sense. (sec. 24)

I trust it is clear that Nietzsche's complex analysis of Judaism allows for multiple (mis)interpretations. Selective use of individual sentences or fragments can paint him either as a philo- or anti-Semite, and both have been done. But by examining his writings in detail we gain a reasonably coherent understanding of his position — of a strong dislike for Jews and for the morality that Judaism (and Christianity) have brought, but also an admiration for Jewish resiliency and 'success'. The bottom line, however, is clear: Judaism is something that must be *overcome*.

It is interesting to speculate on what he would have thought of events of the 20th century. Had he not contracted syphilis and died in 1900, he might well have lived to witness the early rise of Hitler and Nazism. (He would have been 89 in 1933, when Hitler took power.) Likely his support would have been conditional at best. Had he lived to see the emergence of the Holocaust industry, AIPAC, and Jewish influence on American media and government, he might well have felt vindicated.

Nietzsche's analysis of the Jewish problem is powerful, insightful, and utterly unique. It is of the sort that could never be conducted today by any 'mainstream' philosopher. Let us be thankful that he lived and wrote in a time when such truly free thought was still possible.

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