

CRUEL MORALITY? On Nietzsche and the Roman Empire

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ABSTRACT

What comes below is merely a minor note on Nietzsche's great work, so original in thought and spectacular in style. The entry on him in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy shows that post-modernism has been conducive to a fundamental re-evaluation of his multifaceted messages. As the literature on Nietzsche grows every year, his anticipation of social science subjectivism, epistemological perspectivism and strong endorsement of secularism constitutes more and more a centre of comments and research in humanities and the social sciences.

Keywords: Nietzsche, 3 chief tenets, Roman moral superiority, St. Paul's deception, civilisations

INTRODUCTION

The literature on Friedrich Nietzsche keeps augmenting with new comments and fresh interpretations. His books are now all available on the WEB. Post-modernist philosophy has resulted in a fundamental re-evaluation of his ideas. Thus, the emphasis is now upon his insights into human personality and the links between psychology and dominant culture and moral ideology in society. Their key words are emancipation, self-realization and expressiveness.

Nietzsche's originality is no doubt his subjectivism in a period when the dominant philosophy was positivistic, underlining objectivity, making him a major forerunner to the post-modernist revolution in social thought after the Second World War. Together with Dane S. Kierkegaard, he is seen as a major source of inspiration for existentialism.

NIETZSCHE'S SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Nietzsche's major efforts went into practical philosophy, especially moral theory and its social functions, with his typical perspective of power as a dominant force in shaping culture, like e.g. religion. Leaving aside the talk about "Ueberschensch" and the "will to power", Nietzsche is now seen as the philosopher of individualism, subjectivism and personal freedom. And he is regarded as the first philosopher of perspectivism: "There are no facts".

Yet, in his moral philosophy and his deep analyses of Ancient philosophy and early Christianity, Nietzsche launched an idea that is astonishing, even today when secularization has run its course. Did he actually endorse a morality of cruelty in some of his texts? His strong endorsement of the Roman civilization points at exactly that/

Given the well-known problem of authenticity of Nietzsche's statements due to the interference of his sister before and after his death in 1900, one must be extremely careful in interpretation of and selection of *basic tenets* with him. To my knowledge, his commentators have not pointed out his extremely positive evaluation of the Romans (Young,2010; Magnus

and Higgins, 1994; Tanner, 1994). However, Nietzsche was first and foremost a genial expert of Greece Antiquity – language and literature, discovering e.g. the originality of the so-called Pre-Socrates and Post-Socrates, whom he strongly preferred to the couple Socrates-Plato.

Below, I attempt to document how he evaluates the Roman civilization by a series of quotations from his books. I insert my comments in between these quotations. I wish to show that he upholds a few basic beliefs about the Romans in almost all his texts.

NIETZSCHE'S TENETS ON ROMAN CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY

In many of his texts, Nietzsche develops *three tenets* that come back time and again. They are:

- a) Christianity turned Roman values upside down, making the non-honorable into honorable, rejecting the noble and favouring the non-noble.
- b) Christianity is nothing but the uproar of the Jews against Roman excellence and valour.
- c) St Paul is the key actor in this transformation of values, driven by hate against the strong and noble.

I simply want to ask here: True? And moreover I wish to reflect upon cruelty, and the admiration of the Roman Empire. Let us isolate what Nietzsche in fact says in various books and booklets about the Roman civilization, from its beginning to its Western fall, and its socio-psychological morality.

NIETZSCHE'S TEXTS

There was some 15 years of active output of texts, books and pamphlets, poems and aphorisms in Nietzsche's life before mental illness silenced him in 1889. A critique of Christianity is to be found in almost all books, or booklets except his first book: *The Birth of Tragedy (1872)*. This is hardly surprising, given the general spirit of secularization in the mid- 1850s and 1860s. But the particular tenets of Nietzsche about the Roman civilization, Christianity and St Paul deserve a closer examination as they are stunning. Are they really true?

In his *Anti-Christ* from 1888, Nietzsche sums up his rejection of the religion of Christianity in a succinct form, launching "a curse on Christianity". Here, we find not only a total rejection of the basic ideas of Christian theology and salvation, but also the tenets above a), b) and c).

Anti-Christ (1888

Moral superiority of the Romans

We read in *The Anti-Christ*:

(Q1). . . What stood as aere perennius, the imperium Romanum, the most magnificent form of organization ever to be achieved under difficult conditions, compared to which everything before or after has just been patched together, botched and diletantish, those holy anarchists made a 'piety' out of destroying 'the world', which is to say the imperium Romanum, until every stone was overturned, - until even the Germans and other thugs could rule over it . . . (Nietzsche, 2005: 60

Comment 1: True, the Romans were master of social organization: Law was their great gift to humanity.

(Q2) The Christian and the anarchist: both are decadents, neither one can do anything except dissolve, poison, lay waste, bleed dry, both have instincts of mortal hatred against everything that stands, that stands tall, that has endurance, that promises life a future . . . Christianity was the vampire of the imperium Romanum, - overnight, it obliterated the Romans' tremendous

deed of laying the ground for a great culture that had time. - You still don't understand? .
(Nietzsche, 2005: 60-61)

Comment 2: Questionable: Are Christian culture decadent and Roman culture “tall”?

(Q3) The imperium Romanum that we know, that we are coming to know better through the history of the Roman provinces, this most remarkable artwork in the great style was a beginning, its design was calculated to prove itself over the millennia, -, nothing like it has been built to this day, nobody has even dreamed of building on this scale, sub specie aeternity - This organization was stable enough to hold up under bad emperors: the accident of personalities cannot make any difference with things like this, -first principle of all great architecture. .
(Nietzsche, 2005: 610)

Comment 3: Half true: The Romans developed great architecture, but its policy was not stable, especially after the fall of the Republic.

Christian reversal of values

(Q4) This secretive worm that crept up to every individual under the cover of night, fog, and ambiguity and sucked the seriousness for true things, the instinct for reality in general right out of every individual, this cowardly, feminine, saccharine group gradually alienated the 'souls' from that tremendous structure, - those valuable, those masculine-noble natures that saw Rome's business as their own business, their own seriousness, their own pride. The priggish creeping around, the conventicle secrecy, dismal ideas like hell, like the sacrifice of the innocent, like the unio mystica in the drinking of blood... - that is what gained control over Rome.... (Nietzsche, 2005: 61)

Comment 4: Neglect: All religions have mystical ingredients, often of blood nature. The Roman state was founded upon a contract with its Gods, as shown by Swedish philosopher Haegerstroem, linking Roman Law with religious ideas about duty or the obligation to the state as divine.

Direrole of St. Paul

(Q5) Paul's genius consists of this insight. His instinct in this was so certain that he took the ideas people found fascinating in Chandala religions and, with ruthless violence to the truth, put them into the mouth (and not just the mouth) of his invention, the 'saviour', - he made him into something that even a Mithras priest could understand . . . This was his Damascene moment: he understood that he needed the belief in immortality to devalue 'the world', that the idea of 'hell' could still gain control over Rome...(Nietzsche, 2005: 62)

Comment 5: " Chandala" is Sanskrit, which Nietzsche as linguistic genius was knowable of. It refers to the class of untouchables. He appreciated Buddhism more than Christianity, because it was a religion of decadence of the noble classes.

What is maybe stunning is the thesis that Nietzsche maintains that:

- i) Christianity is Judaism re-invented by St. Paul;
- ii) It is nothing by a giant reversal of good and bad;
- iii) Judaism and Christian is the slave morals, enslaving civilizations, like the Ancient Roman and present European/

These theses have never been closely examined. I believe it expresses an admiration of cruelty. I will first enquire whether the above quotations are unique for Nietzsche over his productive period and then make a critique of them.

Since Anti-Christ belongs to his last books or booklets, it may not be considered authoritative, as the outburst of his mental illness was rather close in time. Let us go through the other texts by Nietzsche to find out whether he propagates the same tenets a), b) and c).

Genealogy of Morals (1887)

We make a few key quotations:

(Q6) "Which of them has *prevailed* for the time being, Rome or Judea? But there is no trace of doubt: just consider to whom you bow down in Rome itself, today, as though to the embodiment of the highest values – and not just in Rome, but over nearly half the earth, everywhere where man has become tame or wants to become tame, to *three Jews*, as we know, and *one Jewess* (to Jesus of Nazareth, Peter the Fisherman, Paul the Carpet-Weaver ...". (Nietzsche, 2006: 32)

Comment 6: Here we have again the tenet of Christianity defeating Rome, and moreover later on we find - typical for him - the idea of resentment:

(Q7) This is very remarkable: without a doubt Rome has been defeated. However, in the Renaissance there was a brilliant, uncanny reawakening of the classical ideal, of the noble method of valuing everything Rome itself woke up, as though from suspended animation, under the pressure of the new, Judaic Rome built over it, which looked like an ecumenical synagogue and was called 'Church': but Judea triumphed again at once, thanks to that basically proletarian (German and English) *ressentiment*-movement which people called the Reformation... . (Nietzsche, 2006: 33)

Comment 7: The *ressentiment* idea of Nietzsche may perhaps be interpreted as his hatred of ideas arguing against *moral superiority*.

(Q8)... Judea once again triumphed over the classical ideal with the French Revolution: the last political nobility in Europe, that of the *French* seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, collapsed under the *ressentiment*-instincts of the rabble, – the world had never heard greater rejoicing and more uproarious enthusiasm! True, the most dreadful and unexpected thing happened in the middle: the ancient ideal itself appeared *bodily* and with unheard-of splendour before the eye and conscience of mankind, and once again, stronger, simpler and more penetrating than ever, in answer to the old, mendacious *ressentiment* slogan of *priority for the majority*, of man's will to baseness, abasement, levelling, decline and decay... . (Nietzsche, 2006: 32)

Comment 8: Modern democracy coming during Nietzsche's life time is interpreted as also *ressentiment*, stemming ultimately from Jewish Christianity.

Beyond Good and Bad (1886)

First, a few quotations:

(Q9)The Jews—a people 'born for slavery,' as Tacitus and the whole ancient world say of them; 'the chosen people among the nations,' as they themselves say and believe—the Jews performed the miracle of the inversion of valuations, by means of which life on earth obtained a new and dangerous charm for a couple of millenniums. Their prophets fused into one the expressions 'rich,' 'godless,' 'wicked,' 'violent,' 'sensual,' and for the first time coined the word 'world' as a term of reproach. In this inversion of valuations (in which is also included the use of the word 'poor' as synonymous with 'saint' and 'friend') the significance of the Jewish people is to be found; it is with them that the slave revolt commences. (Nietzsche, 2000: 84)

Comment 9: Nietzsche's dire slave insurrection tenet comes here. But he mixes this debasement of the Jewish people with positive comments:

Q10) What Europe owes to the Jews?—Many things, good and bad, and above all one thing of the nature both of the best and the worst: the grand style in morality, the fearfulness and majesty of infinite demands, of infinite significations, the whole Romanticism and sublimity of moral questionableness—and consequently just the most attractive, ensnaring, and exquisite element in those iridescences and allurements to life, in the after sheen of which the sky of our European culture, its evening sky, now glows—perhaps glows out. For this, we artists among the spectators and philosophers, are—grateful to the Jews.

. (Nietzsche, 2000 : 141)

Comment 10: Nietzsche is simply not coherent, but makes contradictory statements about Judaism and the Jewish nation. At the end of the day, one does not really understand who the villain is in the his civilization story; Christians, Jews, or merely St. Paul?

Daybreak (1881)

Two quotations may be referred to:

(Q11) What actually took place, then, was this: his mind was suddenly enlightened, and he said to himself: "It is unreasonable to persecute this Jesus Christ! Here is my means of escape, here is my complete vengeance, here and nowhere else have I the destroyer of the Law in my hands!" The sufferer from anguished pride felt himself restored to health all at once, his moral despair disappeared in the air; for morality itself was blown away, annihilated—that is to say, *fulfilled*, there on the Cross! Up to that time that ignominious death had seemed to him to be the principal argument against the "Messiahship" proclaimed by the followers of the new doctrine: but what if it were necessary for doing away with the Law? The enormous consequences of this thought, of this solution of the enigma, danced before his eyes, and he at once became the happiest of men. The destiny of the Jews, yea, of all mankind, seemed to him to be intertwined with this instantaneous flash of enlightenment: he held the thought of thoughts, the key of keys, the light of lights; history would henceforth revolve round him! For from that time forward he would be the apostle of the *annihilation of the Law!* To be dead to sin—that meant to be dead to the Law also; to be in the flesh—that meant to be under the Law! To be one with Christ—that meant to have become, like Him, the destroyer of the Law; to be dead with Him—that meant likewise to be dead to the Law. .(Nietzsche, :41

Comment 11: Nietzsche's argument is complex; St Paul destroys Judaism for Chistianity's sake or his own sake, but the morality of these two world religion is still decadence.

(Q12) Then Paul's exaltation was at its height, and with it the importunity of his soul—the thought of union with Christ made him lose all shame, all submission, all constraint, and his ungovernable ambition was shown to be revelling in the expectation of divine glories. Such was the first Christian, the inventor of Christianity! before him there were only a few Jewish sectaries. . (Nietzsche, 1997: 41-42

Comment 12: This is again Nietzsche's hypothesis about St. Paul, plotting against mankind by subverting Chritianity with Jewish values, in his opinion.

Humans, all too human (1878)

(Q13a) As soon as it is no longer a question of the conserving of nations but of the production of the strongest possible European mixed race, the Jew will be just as usable and desirable as an ingredient of it as any other national residue. Every nation, every man, possesses

unpleasant, indeed dangerous qualities: it is cruel to demand that the Jew should constitute an exception. In him these qualities may even be dangerous and repellent to an exceptional degree; and perhaps the youthful stock-exchange Jew is the most repulsive invention of the entire human race. Nonetheless I should like to know how much must, in a total accounting, be forgiven a people who, not without us all being to blame, have had the most grief laden history of any people and whom we have to thank for the noblest human being (Christ), the purest sage (Spinoza), the mightiest book and the most efficacious moral code in the world. . (Nietzsche, 2005: 175

(Q13b) ... it is thanks not least to their efforts that a more natural, rational and in any event unmythical elucidation of the world could at last again obtain victory and the ring of culture that now unites us with the enlightenment of Graeco-Roman antiquity remain unbroken. If Christianity has done everything to orientalize the occident, Judaism has always played an essential part in occidentalizing it again: which in a certain sense means making of Europe's mission and history a continuation of the Greek. . (Nietzsche, 2005: 175

Comment 13: In these remarkable quotations, Nietzsche rejects the anti-Semitic proposal that he made in other texts. Interesting! But he maintains his rejection of Christianity and admiration for Greek-Roman culture.

THE TENETS BY NIETZSCHE

We have now documented extensively that the three tenets by Nietzsche are not accidental but often repeated as his fundamental civilization convictions. Are the true?

Christianity Destroying Roman Empire

This is of course the well-known argument by historian Edward Gibbons (1776-1789). But it is so contested and challenged by other theories about the fall of the Roman Empire that one may safely say that Nietzsche contributes nothing. It is true that Nietzsche had studied Greek culture in much detail, but he was hardly a historian of Rome. Numerous hypotheses have been put forward: invasions by Barbarian tribes, economic troubles and overreliance on slave labour, the rise of the Eastern Empire, overexpansion and military overspending, government corruption and political instability, the arrival of the Huns and the migration of the Barbarian tribes, Christianity and the loss of traditional values and the weakening of the Roman legions. In addition, one may mention the theory of a basic shift in economic system, from commerce and trade to serf labour and self-sufficiency, anticipating the feudalisation of the economy and social relationships. The economic system hypothesis was anticipated by Max Weber (1909) and fully developed by Rostovtzeff (1926).

Who was St. Paul?

I have never seen an authoritative biography on the life of St. Paul. Actually, we know little about him. We suppose he died in Rome as a martyr, but the basic source is the Epistles, which may not always be accurate. Nietzsche's theory that he transformed Christianity in order to subvert the Roman Empire for the sake of the Jews is utterly non-sense. Christian theology owes much to St. Paul, but there are other great architects of the Church. Nietzsche's conspirator hypothesis about St. Paul, subverting Christianity to defeat the Empire appears ridiculous. We do not know for certain who wrote all the Epistles, attributed to St. Paul.

The great importance of the Epistles for Christian theology and social organization against persecutions was the message about salvation from sin through belief in the death of Jesus. This is a theme not found with the Apostles, but recurs time and again in the history of

Christianity, with Augustin, in the Reformation, with Dane Kierkegaard and modern Protestant theologians.

Superiorty of Roman Civilisation Values

Here, we have the crux of the matter, namely Nietzsche's admiration for the Roman civilization. At first, Nietzsche's endorsement of the Roman civilization as one of the truly greatest comes somewhat as a surprise, given his insights into the Greek civilization, where he admired philosophy, literature and fine arts. The Romans had little of that, with a few exceptions. Roman civilization is entirely based upon the instruments of force and power: the legions, law, institutions, grand scale infrastructure and architecture slavery, domination of other peoples and the massive employment of physical violence.

One may separate the history of the Roman civilization into two parts:

- i) The Republic from 567 – 27 before Christ
- ii) The Empire from 27 B.D. – 476 a.d.

During the Republic, government was highly institutionalized, whereas the Empire was characterized by increasing arbitrariness, ending in oriental despotism like government. The use and abuse of power occurred frequently the Republic, while it became legio under the Empire. During the Republic, the neighbouring peoples were subjugated in a long series of war, besides the occurrence of civil wars within Rome. The Empire brought about huge extension of empire territory, opening it up for constant incursions of so-called barbarians. Sometimes the Empire was governed by insane emperors, resulting in turmoil and civil war.

The larger the territory of Rome, the more violent conflicts. Defensive war or offensive ones, both were conducive to making Rome a garrison state. The army became the first priority of the state: how to feed it, how to control it, and how to pay the soldiers during and after combat? Mutiny was legion, as the army always wanted more. It sometimes appointed the Emperor. As the wars become more frequent, getting more soldiers was so urgent that also barbarians could be enrolled. Enormous undertakings to construct fortresses to shield off the borders from outsiders were done at high costs but will no permanent positive results. In sum, Rome was a martial republic or empire, completely at odds with Greece (Erdkamp, 2013; Southern 2016; Mattingly, 2013).

The second pillar of Rome was Colosseum and its enormous undertakings in various gaming. Where ever the Romans settle down, they established the business of gladiators and beats killing humans. It was an enterprise of gigantic scale, especially when Christians were persecuted. "*Panem et circences*" were the main concern of Romans, who did not participate the war machine. Bread and circus, said Roman satirist Juvenal, were the preoccupations of the week. Lots of animals were imported monthly and then the persecution of Christians fleeing in the catacombs began (Auguet, 2012; Dowling, 2000).

ROMAN USE OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE

Now, why would Nietzsche endorse the Roman culture of warfare and cruelty? He was after 1879 a sick man, weak and emotionally instable until his total collapse in 1889. His early admiration of Greek culture is obvious, based on entirely different values.

If St. Paul contributed in any small way to stop the "*panem et circenses*", then is he not a friend of humanity, a spokesman for equality? The Roman Empire rested too much upon physical violence, slavery and pillage, despite the advancements in law and architecture. Why would its downfall be such a huge loss for mankind? Some 50% of its population was slaves, which was

only possible through an enormous slave trade and looting. The people that Nietzsche calls inferior – the Jews – were numerous, i.e. millions in the Empire, but refused slavery. Their uproar in 70 A.D. proved very difficult for the Roman Army to crush due to heroic resistance. The revenge was to start the forced exodus of the Jewish people from Jerusalem, turning them into ghettos of *pariah*, as Weber (1967) commented in his Nietzsche inspired realism – a trail of persecutions from Spain to Iran over Lithuania.

CONCLUSION

Nietzsche had a well of ideas that he returned to in his books and booklets, not always coherently. His reputation has been much enlarged with post-modernism, as a very early spokesman for subjectivity and human autonomy against prevailing dominant culture.

However, I think one must point out his preference for the Roman civilization with its incredible preoccupation with mechanisms of cruelty, ahead of the message from the man from Nazareth: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, states Matheus. Christian civilisation, it is true, involved also massive mental domination of people and persecutions as well as warfare. But St. Paul can hardly be blamed for the Papacy or the Lutheran state church, i.e. their oppression of individuality and personal autonomy.

Can one rank empires in terms of cruelty? The Mongols would come top, decimating the population of entire Central Asia. The Third Reich and Stalin's Soviet Union would be second, but perhaps the Roman civilization is up for Third place (Wallis, 2016)?

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