

*Nothing has preoccupied me more profoundly than the problem of decadence... “Good and evil” is merely a variation of that problem. Once one has developed a keen eye for the symptoms of decline, one understands morality, too—one understands what is hiding under its most sacred names and value formulas: impoverished life, the will to the end, the great weariness. Morality negates life... (The Case of Wagner, 51)*

The social relation requires re-evaluation in light of decadence, the unmistakable event of cultural decline. Let us say that for Nietzsche there are three impulses in particular which we must isolate, tear out the best parts, and throw away the chaff. These impulses are, in descending order of their urgency at the time of Nietzsche’s writings: Christianity, Nihilism and Socialism. *Human, All Too Human* is a unique text in Nietzsche’s canon, as each ‘impulse’ is vivisected in turn, new pathways opened for thought beyond the archaic form of these impulses — in order that a life-affirming energy may be revitalized.

First, let’s consider Christianity. Though religious faith is analyzed quite closely in the beginning of *Human, All Too Human* (and also in other places, cf. *Anti-Christ* and *Genealogy of Morals*, where ‘faith’ usually appears as a faux-pious ‘wanting-not-to-know,’ functioning ironically within culture as a transcendent knowledge, finally becoming a ‘need’ for this fiction) let’s instead turn to the chapter “A Look at the State,” where he delivers a closer, institutional analysis of the Catholic Church which is to me more piercing:

*The Middle Ages offers in the church an institution with a quite universal goal, comprehending all men, and aimed at their (supposed) highest interest; in contrast to it, the goals of states and nations, which modern history offers, make a disheartening impression; they appear petty, low, materialistic, geographically narrow. But we should not form our judgments because of these different impressions on our imagination; for the universal institution of the church was reflecting artificial needs, based on fictions, which, if they were not yet present, it first had to produce (need for redemption.) The new institutions help in real states of need; and the time is coming when institutions will be formed in order to serve the common, true needs of all men, and to place that fantastic prototype, the Catholic Church, into the shadows of oblivion. (Human, All Too Human 476)*

So in order to fulfill the stated universal goal of the church, the best course of action would be to totally forget it: a perversion of means and ends necessarily follows from the artificial recursivity of social reality which such a ‘decadent’ institution produces, even as its essential function. That is, such an institution, which is incapable of meeting actual needs — or, for which doing so no longer guarantees its continued existence, must instead create false needs within people — and then position themselves as the only ones capable of fulfilling these artificial desires.

Nietzsche suggests that what we perceive in the modern states as ‘low’ materialistic goals and narrow intentions ought to be seen rather as even higher culturally than the ‘lofty’ goals of an all-embracing (‘Catholic’) institution. After all, our government is (ostensibly) concerned with actually serving the actual worldly needs of people, rather than educating them to need the artificial products of a declining culture. Which is not to say that our culture has not erred in perhaps the opposite, equally dangerous direction: we may have taken too far the security of

commerce, of institutional inclusion, of pure productivity and consumption above and beyond its capacity to provide for our more subtle, social or spiritual desires.

So there are two poles of social-desiring: institutions can align themselves as closed or open to its various subject- and subjugated-groups. A 'catholic' institution is closed: in pretending to embrace everything, and in so overblowing their task and its dignity, actually embraces nothing. Thus the core of Christianity is nihilistic: it wishes to be done with this world, and to already have its proper reward. This effectively suicidal motivation is the sole spark of the divine left in religion — which is why faith alone is as a hollowness, empty of vitality, a sublime absence (of the sacred.) Thus does culture declines until people need the artificial fullness of closed institutions to survive: thought becomes an eternal deterrence of judgment and desire. Slowly the manufactured desire for future redemption expands, until this hollowness alone provides the source of social order. Under such 'universal' institutions only slaves are produced: some slaves to addiction and self-gratification, others to indolence and luxury, still others to envy and suspicion.

So what, above all, does such an institutionalized society demand of us? That we become a grateful culture, that is, a slave culture: "There are slavish souls who carry their thanks for favors so far that they actually strangle themselves with the rope of gratitude." (550) Such a society gives us just enough freedom to completely annihilate our freedom, through gratitude for being so privileged with liberty. Thus equality of liberty leads to an equal degradation, an equality of punishment or consequence. "Modern democracy is the historical form of the decline of the state." (472) Our modern democratic institutions found themselves on a false equality which has no relation to the actual social order, no basis in reality other than what is henceforth made to be equal: an equality of 'freedom,' much closer to an equality of 'justice.' This freedom is a necessary social fiction, and extends only as far as its material inversion: hierarchy, dependence, concurrence, exploitation. It is, as it were, a self-deception: this deception is our decadence at its very core. Now decadence is dangerous because it disguises itself as its opposite, and seeks to do its damage precisely under the most auspicious, life-affirming and healthy of guises. We must learn how to reverse perspectives, to re-evaluate culture and modernity from a future perspective. We are, as Nietzsche says, to trust our noses, and have faith in our own higher politics. Democracy without limits degenerates into slavery without limits: and to whom are we grateful for this 'freedom'? To our government, to social institutions whose aims are hastily nihilistic, entirely self-centered and ultimately suicidal? We are even made grateful for our future, whether to the global capitalist market, to the futuristic war-machine, or to the micro-revolutionary pockets of resistance to both.

Which brings us neatly, and finally, to socialism. Nietzsche is unequivocal on the problematic logic of immediate social change. For in an important sense, socialism is a secular continuation of the 'universalized' goals of the catholic church, to restore the original and pure shape of humanity. Thus Nietzsche's objections to socialism is that it is often too one-sided, even too much of the masses, who are certainly no 'purer' than the masters, or any less responsible for the 'injustice' of society. Nietzsche sees the socialist 'apostles' as filling people full of envy and vengeance: the arguments are too vulgar, the means too hasty, the leaders too envious of the wealth and power they claims not to be personally interested in. Socialism can be a reaction to excessive power, and in this it can be an object lesson of the danger of the accumulation of

power: “Socialism is the visionary younger brother of an almost decrepit despotism, whose heir it wants to be. Thus its efforts are reactionary in the deepest sense.” (473)

Still, there is hope. The state will clearly endure for a good while: it is clever and selfish and envious of all sources of order. But revolution is possible, indeed necessary — the question is how to support a revolutionary order whose hour has not yet come. The true revolutionary is the one whose interest extends beyond himself; who has overcome his lust for power, who cannot be bought out— because his prize lies precisely in the future. Unfortunately, this quickly becomes a messianic faith, even up to a post-history, a culture beyond malice, violence and war. But war remains necessary as long as culture exists: “Culture absolutely cannot do without passions, vices, and acts of malice.” (477) In short, culture is the movement of cruelty upon social bodies. Our most passionate and most ignorant hope is that we will not recognize the humanity of the future: what is certain is that in giving up conflict we sacrifice the very means of cultural rejuvenation. For as long as there is a state, we shall always have priests and warlords, hypocrisy and decadence, violence and injustice. Oppression is the means by which a culture safeguards its highest values; which is why violence towards innocence is the real meaning of revolution. It is a kind of daybreak after a long period of darkness. Thus its ambiguity and critical blindness towards the present: for without this blindness there could not be revolutionary hope.