



TRACING THE POSTMODERN BEGINNINGS IN NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

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Abstract

According to Nietzsche, the modern age, by priding itself on the maniacal quests, has lost his instincts of self-overcoming, and subjected himself/herself to be treated like the objects of/by the system. Though the systems, states and institutions of modern age flourished abundantly in this process, humans could not assert themselves; rather than being the creators of new values, they became servile to the systems. The modern human's life has become non-natural in the sense that recreation means leaving from the alienating work and personal atmosphere. The instincts of joy have been oriented to artificial recreations. Even in art, which is also a source of critical thinking, the life of modern human has become a folly as they resort to leisure by converting the earlier modes of critical thinking and intellectual stimulations as recreational ventures, against the vulnerabilities of alienating work atmospheres. This paper is an attempt at tracing the postmodern beginnings within the philosophical exegesis of Nietzsche.

Key Words: Nietzsche, Postmodernism, Modernity, Revaluation of all values.

Introduction

This paper is a modest attempt at tracing the postmodern beginnings within the philosophical notions of Nietzsche. Before that it needs a mention as to what postmodern means among the postmodernists. The word 'postmodern' presupposes something that is beyond the realm of what is understood as 'modern' as well as something that are critical about the continuing influences of modern conditions. Then what are the aspects that are understood as modern/modernity/modern conditions? Though a consensus on what is modern still eludes, it stands for the Enlightenment ideals for some; for some others, it marks the period of industrial revolution and its aftermath; for some, it symbolises the emergence of bourgeois democracy; for some, it denotes the shift of paradigm from religion and theology to a secular and scientific understanding of reality; for the third world, it was understood as the colonializing tendency of the West and so on. However, all such aspects converge in what we conveniently call as modern/modernity.



In such a case, Postmodernism is understood “perhaps just (as) a convenient label for a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings about what it means to be living in the late 20th century.” (Robinson 1999) Though the trend started within Europe as a critique of modern European conditions, it picked up momentum in non-European context also with varied degrees of applications to understand the native conditions. While some ‘post-modernist’ philosophers have underscored the highly vacuous nature of this trend and rejected the coinage of this term, some postmodernists like Lyotard and Foucault stood for it. And Foucault even identified Nietzsche as the founder and trendsetter of postmodern philosophization. (Robinson 1999)

Critique of Modernity

Nietzsche has a disgust for what is practised as modern by the common folks. Though in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he celebrates the advent of modernity with its rationalism and scientific temper and announces the ‘death of god’, he finds certain problems in the way the modernity is presupposed popularly. In a scathing attack on modernity, he says,

“My feelings suddenly alter, burst forth, immediately I enter the modern age, *our* age. Our age knows... what was formerly morbid had today become indecent – an here is where my disgust commences” (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981)

Why does he express his disgust for modernity needs an explanation. In *Ecce Homo*, he says,

“All those things on which the age prides itself are felt as conflicting with the type mentioned (Overman)... Among these things are our far-formed “objectivity”, “sympathy with all that suffers”, “the historical sense” with its servility before foreign tastes, its lying-in-the dust before *petit faits* and finally the science mania.” (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 1954)

The concepts of modernism together with the common instincts of modernity are contradicted here by Nietzsche. However, Nietzsche’s expectations of man needs to be carefully considered here, as he juxtaposes the qualities of the common human with the Overman. Nietzsche wants the humans to live their lives as a work of art; and above all he wants humans to live to their instincts of life rather than bifurcating the reality into subject and object. On the contrary to what he means by ‘the meaning of life and world’, the modern age prides itself on pseudo-objectivism, pseudo-equality, on construction of knowledge as real and the primacy of the science at the cost of human existence. The problem he brings forth here is that by priding itself on the maniacal quests, the modern human has lost his instincts of self-overcoming, and subjected himself/herself to be treated like the objects of the system. Though the systems, states and institutions of modern age flourished abundantly in this process, humans could not assert



themselves; rather they became servile to the systems; rather than being the creators of new values, they only try to preserve and maintain old values as the meaning of life.

Further, Nietzsche criticises the way in which the modern human leads the life, thus:

“The man of the evening, with the ‘wild instincts lulled to sleep’ of which Faust speaks, requires the health of the resort, the seaside, the glaciers, Bayreuth... In ages like this, art has a right to pure *folly* – as a kind of holiday for the spirit, the wits and the heart.” (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981)

That is, the modern human’s life has become non-natural in the sense that recreation means leaving from the alienating work and personal atmosphere. The instincts of joy have been oriented to artificial recreations. Even in art, which is also a source of critical thinking, has been demoted as a spot for recreation. In this sense, the life of modern human has become a folly as they resort to leisure by converting the earlier modes of critical thinking and intellectual stimulations as recreational ventures, against the vulnerabilities of alienating work atmospheres. This point can be well understood by what Nietzsche means as the genius of Julius Caesar who defended himself against the sickness of the work.

“Tremendous marches, the simplest form of living, uninterrupted sojourn in the open air, continuous toil – these, broadly speaking, are the universal preservative and protective measures against the extreme vulnerability of that subtle machine working at the highest pressure which is called genius.” (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981)

The extreme anti-natural construction of existential way of life, the artificiality even in the human instincts, the pseudo-conception of equality, the castrated subjectivity by giving thrust on the supposedly non-human objectivity, the pre-dominance of value systems over the freedom of individual – these are some the aspects which Nietzsche saw as the agents of decadence among the moderns.

The “incorrigible blockheads and clowns of modern ideas” (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 1954), as Nietzsche would call the moderns, want to fashion the mankind in the warp of already existing systems without creating a new system which would offer more free and creative potentialities to humans. In other words, moderns have raised the notions of modernity to the level of unalterable metanarratives, as if the modern notions are value-in-itself without human intervention. In this way, Nietzsche understood that the metanarratives of modernity might not help to solve the paradoxes of human existence, rather it might create new problematics for the humans. Hence, he suggests,

“These masters of today, surpass them, O my brethren – these petty people: they are Superman’s greatest danger”. (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 1954)



All these enunciations find their way, somehow or the other, in the postmodernist elaborations about modernity. Very interestingly, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno develop their critique of art based on Nietzsche's critique of modernity too.

Revaluation of All values

When Nietzsche proposes the modern human to be antithetical to the Superman/Overman, he basically does this on his celebrated notion of 'revaluation of all values'. One can trace the postmodern beginnings of Nietzsche in this notion. He emphasises this notion all through his philosophical expositions, and especially he relates the values to the existential meaning of life, thus: "Life itself evaluates through us when we establish values". (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981). The value of life and its meaning cannot be grasped as such without the estimation of value that an individual takes up.

He goes further and says, "Value judgments concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true: they possess value only as symptoms, they come into consideration only as symptoms" (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981). The value with which one directs his existence is symptomatic of the meaning of his existence; it provides the result of the meaning of his existence as it is the symptom of life. This explains Nietzsche's non-moral morality.

While commenting on this notion in his autobiographical book, '*Ecce Homo*', he says,

"For the task of *transvaluing values*... the art of separating without creating hostility; to confuse nothing; to reconcile nothing; to be tremendously various and yet to be reverse of chaos – all this was the first condition." (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 1954)

With the condition to be tremendously various and yet to be the reverse of chaos, Nietzsche proposes the 'revaluation of all values' as the non-moral morality; it means that the old value systems have to be forsaken for the creation of new meanings of life. In his *Twilight of the Idols*, he means the truths and ideals as the idols which need to be forsaken, as the "old truth is nearing its end" (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 1954).

Nietzsche's philosophy starts with his criticism of the givenness and the present. Nietzsche's critics may term his criticism of the present as nihilism or pessimism. But his doubting and deconstructing of the present is the corner stone of his philosophy on which the futuristic ideas are built upon. Though his philosophy may seem to be nihilism at first sight, actually it is the reverse of nihilism. In *Ecce Homo*, he clearly states his intention to be a nihilist. He says, "I contradict as no one has contradicted before, and nevertheless I am the reverse of a negative spirit. Hope is reborn with me."



For Nietzsche, criticising/deconstructing the present or the givenness gives hope for the future. In another place, he opines that “the overthrowing of idols (ideals) means improving the mankind.” So, it is quite clear that the humanism of Nietzsche starts from the deconstruction of the given reality. For Nietzsche, accepting what is given to humans points out the symptom of decadence. He opines, “All the things men have valued with such earnestness heretofore”, such as the concept of God, Soul, Virtue, Sin, Truth, Eternity and Divinity, “are not even realities, they are mere fantasies.” Acceptance of the Christian value system, in particular, and the metanarratives, in general, deprives “reality of its value, its meaning and its truth.”

Through the negation of the concept of god, religion and morality and metanarratives, Nietzsche places, the stress on the apprehension of Reality. The yea-saying to life, the revaluation of all values, eternal recurrence, the Overman – all these Nietzschean ideas subscribe to the primary importance of Reality. In other words, for Nietzsche, the salvation of humanity lies not in the commandments of God or morality or religion, but it lies in nourishing oneself through the apprehension of reality in the ‘Renaissance Style’.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes ‘Overman’, the consummation of his philosophy, as Reality himself. He explains further that, though all the ‘doubt and terror of reality’ can be found in Overman, he is destined to greatness. It is the ever-changing dialectics of reality that makes one the superhuman. For Nietzsche, “the terrors of reality are incalculably more essential” for the dynamic society. In other words, the Greek tragedy is the model for a dynamic society, for him, since it couples the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of reality. The Dionysian unrestrained cheerfulness and yea-saying to life as well as the Apollonian perceptions of the terrors of reality, devoid of god and religious precepts, are essential for the continuous attainment of a vibrant and ever-changing society.

The conditions for the ‘revaluation of all values’ postulate contradictions, without creating chaos, within the ‘idols’ of the premodern and modern conditions. It is to reveal the ‘unconscious’ lying beneath the surface and appearance. In the ‘Twilight of the Idols’, he opines,

“Neither Manu nor Plato, neither Confucius nor the Jewish and Christian teachers, ever doubted their right to tell lies... Every means hitherto employed with the intention of making mankind moral has been thoroughly immoral.” (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981)

He is of the opinion that the ‘real world’ is created out of the contradictions of the actual world through moral-optics. It is the religion and morality which divides actuality into binary opposites, such as good and evil, sacred and profane, holy and profane, truth and falsity and so on; whereas the actual existence lies in between these binaries and not in the peripheral



classifications of reality. The dichotomization/hierarchization of reality is also associated with power and with the creation of power-structures.

Apart from the power-relations, he tried to analyse the sociological aspects of knowledge creation in his earlier essays, such as ‘On truth and Falsity in their Extra-Moral Sense’ and ‘The Use and Abuse of History’ which were published in 1870s. In the first-mentioned essay, he declared that “Social and intellectual life depends on common consent, and this gives birth to a shared consensual reality in which such concepts as ‘knowledge’ inevitably emerge. These concepts are then reinforced by language... the key player in a continual process of self-deception.” (Robinson 1999) Firstly he understood the knowledge formation as a process of negotiated appropriation of the elements involved in the formation of social power-structures. Secondly, the stratified reality is reinforced through language which is believed to be referring to the actual phenomenon of the world; that is, the subject-predicate structure of the language reinforces the subject-object framework in the actuality.

In the above-mentioned essay on ‘The Use and Abuse of History’, he analyses the moral auto-piloting nature of historiography. Though each person considers himself/herself to be unique, he is of the opinion that it is the socio-political past of a person which drives the person’s life without his/her being aware of it. Further, while commenting upon the Christian ideas of sin and guilt, he concludes that “Each individual’s constant fear of reprisal is a great inducement to memory training, and this then leads to the acceptance of a personal sense of responsibility” hiding the social-moral auto-piloting nature of history.

“For Nietzsche, modern politics rests largely on a secular inheritance of Christian values”, says Keith Ansell-Pearson. (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 1994) In the ‘Twilight of the Idols’, Nietzsche says,

“The church has at all times desired the destruction of its enemies... In politics, too, enmity has become much more spiritual – much more prudent, much more thoughtful, much more forbearing.”(Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* 1981)

The modern politics is almost a disguised Christian politics of hegemony, for Nietzsche. Though the resentment politics can be witnessed even during premodern times, it is the modern politics which is fashioned after Christian doctrines that the development was conceived in a linear pattern. Modernity is that era in which being modern becomes a value, or rather, it becomes *the* fundamental value to which all other values refer. (Nehamas 1996) Also, most of the scientific laws are based on the observed regularities; and for most of the 18th century philosophers, ‘reason’ also meant ‘reasoning’. (Robinson 1999)



Instead of these hegemonic discourses of science, rationality, logic and modern politics, Nietzsche proposed another type of human, 'superman/overman'. In his famous book, 'Thus Spake Zarathustra', he pronounced the death of god as a means for creating multiple meanings to earth.

Conclusion

Though Nietzsche's philosophy is considered to be reactionary fantasy by many of the later philosophers, creative re-readings of the works of Nietzsche offered most of the late 20th century French intellectuals a necessary impetus to go beyond the metanarratives of modernity. Nietzsche's figurative writings and stylistic excesses often have taken different interpretations ranging from fascism to feminism and to the recognition of multiplicities and little narratives among postmodern philosophers. However, if read in the context of modernity and its metanarratives, his philosophy can be understood as the beginnings of postmodern discourses.

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