

Ring My Bell

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How to use a life-denigration detector

The first time I opened the door marked *Nietzsche*, aged 21, it was a detour – a jubilant escape from the dreary beaten track. I never made it back, for that's when I began to lose not only my religion but, one by one, most of its surrogates – what Nietzsche calls *shadows of God*. The door stayed ajar, and from time to time I'd give in to the temptation and either flung it open or peaked through it. Other times, a blast of air would throw it wide open. I'm invariably compelled to walk in and then whatever is central to my life undergoes a re-evaluation. Religion, art, love, literature, sex, politics, nationality, spirituality and now therapy – can all be 'sounded out' under Nietzsche's hammer. The hammer is not there to 'smash' personal/public idols (as it is commonly believed), but to investigate them thoroughly, test their soundness – in the same way as one sounds out a bell to see if it has lost its pitch.

My own homespun version of Nietzsche's hammer is a 'denigration detector'. The first thing Nietzsche invites us to look for when weighing a system of thought, a religion, a psychological/scientific method etc, is not whether they are 'true' or 'false', for this would be a task for pedants or dispensers of blame. What matters is whether a method affirms life, or is animated instead by the *instinct of revenge*, i.e. an overriding tendency to denigrate life. In relation to psychotherapy, the question would then be whether a particular form of therapeutic practice is life-affirming or fuelled by the instinct of revenge, by the need to justify, amend, and *redeem* life.

In sounding out the bells of therapy, the intention is, as the poet has it, to *ring the bells that still can ring*. Do they still reverberate? Or have they morphed into muffled incantations uttered in the vain hope, on mid-spring days, to find solace from life's beauty and terror?

The task at hand would be easy if the instinct of revenge were a mere psychological trait, a defect in need of a cure. But for Nietzsche the *instinct of revenge is the fundamental principle*

of psychology itself. In this, psychology follows metaphysics, science and religion – all of them animated by the very same spirit. In a posthumous fragment we read:

Wherever responsibilities have been sought it was the *instinct of revenge* that sought. This instinct of revenge has so mastered mankind in the course of millennia that the whole of metaphysics, psychology, conception of history, but above all morality, is impregnated with it. As far as man has thought, he has introduced the bacillus of revenge into things. He has made even God ill with it, he has *deprived existence* in general *of its innocence*; namely, by tracing back every state of being thus and thus to a will, an intention, a responsible act. The entire doctrine of the will, this most fateful *falsification* in psychology hitherto, was essentially invented for the sake of punishment.

Ressentiment, as Nietzsche also likes to call (in his beloved French) the instinct of revenge, is integral to nihilism. What is nihilism? It is the notion that life in and by itself is next to nothing (*nihil*) without some form of elevation, justification, spiritualization, explanation, redemption etc. Thus understood, nihilism happens to be the chief assumption behind *all* metaphysical claims. All metaphysical systems denigrate life in the name of something placed outside the sensuous perception of life itself, in the name of a psychological/spiritual/scientific explanation. In this sense, nihilism is not a particular worldview or even a category of thought; instead, *categories of thought* themselves (and ‘reasonable’ thought in particular – identity, causality, finality, unity) – *presuppose a nihilistic interpretation of the life-force.*

This calls for a reversal of metaphysics and, in our case, for a *reversal of psychotherapy.* What would a human being devoid of the instinct of revenge be like? We don’t know, because the instinct of revenge has dominated and continues to dominate human history from Socratism to Christianity to dialectical reasoning, all of them giving mortal blows to the affirmation of life. Would a human who does not blame or devalue life still be called *human*? Or would she tilt towards the domain that Nietzsche calls the overhuman?

Despite the fact that psychotherapy is, according to this analysis, steeped in the instinct of revenge, there is hope. I take my clue from Nietzsche, for he believed that despite the fact that psychology is integral to the nihilistic resentment towards life, right at the heart of it there was a possibility of reversal. He saw himself as a physician of culture; he anticipated and influenced the nascent art of psychotherapy. However, psychotherapy moved in a different direction: instead of fostering experiencing/experimentation, it danced first to the merry tune of positivism and now to the happy-clappy tune of neopositivism, the ‘cultural’

expression of neoliberalism. In Nietzsche's days, positivism was deemed to be 'objective' and 'scientific' already and Freud was at pains to prove that psychoanalysis was a science. But already in 1887, Nietzsche defined positivism as "ascetic denial of sensuality"... So, what would it mean to apply some of Nietzsche's subversive ideas to psychotherapy? Can it even be done? One way to start is by paying attention to what Nietzsche did in relation to another art: philosophy.

Life, not 'Being'

By wearing the masks of the wise, of the religious or the scientist, Nietzsche says, some philosophers adapted to a situation in order to survive (in some cases avoiding being burned at the stake as heretics). This is the first, protective task that a mask accomplishes. There is also a second, important task the mask performs. A new emerging force must at first "borrow the features of the forces with which it struggles" (Deleuze). In order to survive, historically philosophers had to maintain a ridiculous disguise: they had to adopt the meditative air of the priest, their heart "remote ... posthumous" (Nietzsche). To a certain degree, this can be appealing; there are "conditions ... conducive to the highest spirituality": the ascetic/religious milieu is how philosophy itself learned to make its first steps. By wearing the mask of religion and 'wisdom', philosophy started believing in the mask itself:

For a long time, *the ascetic ideal* has served the philosopher as a form in which to manifest himself, as a pre-condition of existence – he was obliged to *represent* it in order to be a philosopher, and he was obliged to *believe* in it in order to be able to represent it. The particular remoteness of the philosophers – with its negation of the world, its hostility to life, its scepticism towards the senses, its freedom from sensuality ... this is above all a consequence of the critical situation in which philosophy first emerged and managed to endure ... in so far as ... philosophy would not have been at all possible on earth without an ascetic shell and disguise, without an ascetic self-misunderstanding

The above is a necessary but difficult process, difficult in the sense that when philosophy identifies with religion, it may begin to forget its own independent task. Something similar has happened, I believe, to contemporary therapists who have adopted the language and methodology of neopositivist, neoliberal psychology. They are using the master's tools, to borrow Audre Lorde's expression, in the vain hope of dismantling the master's house. It is at this point that the second task of mask-wearing comes to the fore.

It is our task to *conquer* a particular mask and then, like the philosopher in the task posed by Nietzsche, give it “a new sense which finally expresses its true anti-religious force” (Deleuze). In this second task, mask-wearing becomes trick and artifice, skill and artistry, qualities for which we need courage and discipline. In Nietzsche’s words:

Is there enough pride, daring, boldness, self-assurance, enough spiritual will, will to responsibility, *freedom of will* available today for the philosopher to be from now on really – *possible* on earth?

Is there enough spiritual/political will today for the psychotherapist to *exist*? I often hear colleagues argue in favour of the strategic use of this or that ‘Trojan horse’: mindfulness in the case of Dharma teaching and practice; academic psychology in the case of humanistic/existential ideas and practices. By definition, the Trojan horse carries within the unexpected – something potentially disruptive to the status quo but useful in the service of transformation. But what often happens is that people inside the wooden horse become so pleasingly acquainted with its cosy interior and the soothing muzak that they forget to step out into the fresh air.

For Nietzsche, philosophy has to pierce through the various masks it has worn over the centuries and through this process of unmasking slowly come of age, grasping its own essence. Wisdom too (*Sophia*, from which philosophy borrows its name) is a mask; as such, it has to be overcome. To this active overcoming – mask after mask – Nietzsche gives the name of *interpretation*. But this is *not* the interpretation that mediocre psychodynamic and psychoanalytic practice naively sees as getting to the ‘bottom of things’ or that dogmatic humanistic practitioners recoil from in sheepish horror. It is a far more subtle and, dare I say it, sophisticated process. Interpretation is a difficult art and this is where Nietzsche’s philosophy is invaluable to therapists. It is the fine weighing up of each event and its meaning, the assessment of “forces” that at any given time define the aspects of the event and its “relations” (Deleuze).

Philosophy is for Nietzsche, still coming of age. Compared to it, psychotherapy is still in its infancy. For that reason alone, the latter’s current infatuation with the shiny gadgetries of neopositivism, the soulless lingo of managerialism, and the crushing dullness of quantifiable data may be almost forgiven, provided we do not allow this new mask to solidify into our skin, bone and marrow but that we learn what is there to learn (if anything) and then do the unmasking or interpretation in search of the *essence* of psychotherapy. Essence here is not understood in the abstract/transcendental meaning suggested by the etymology, i.e., the

abstraction of being (*esse*= to be) perpetuated by centuries of idealist thought and the hegemony of the religious-philosophical tradition. The primacy here is (tangible, contingent, incarnate) *life* rather than *being* – a naturalistic view through and through. Search for the essence here means investigation into what kind of different forces are at work in a particular object, in this case psychotherapy itself, bearing in mind that “the object itself is a force” (Deleuze). The essence of an object is then at all times *plural*, for it is a composite of different *forces* at work.

Should one still crave hermeneutics (a discipline that has, in my view, lost its way) it would be ideally oriented along *naturalistic* rather than *onto-theological* principles. Thus conceived, a hermeneutic practice will no longer be interested in the so-called truth or in the so-called truth of being. It will investigate instead what *natural forces* are at play, assessing whether the balance can be tilted in favour of *active* forces, i.e. of life-affirming, expansive and exploratory tendencies rather than *reactive* ones, i.e. life-denigrating, solely self-preserving tendencies. In Nietzsche’s language, this is often presented as the polarity between health and sickness, a polarization he lived and suffered first-hand. It also constitutes the basic outline of his profoundly *naturalist* philosophy.

Pluralism, in Nietzsche’s sense, always arises from this immersion in the organismic life of nature, where one finds that the being of a force is plural and that it would be absurd to think about a force as singular (Deleuze).

This is also where Nietzsche breaks with Schopenhauer (a crucial point for those interested in linking Nietzsche to Freud’s psychoanalysis), for whereas the will (much like Freud’s *id*) is *unitary* in Schopenhauer, it is at all times *multiple* in Nietzsche. Even more significantly: while a unitary vision of the will as the prime motor of a samsaric world brings about renunciation in Schopenhauer, the vision of the will as multiple results in Nietzsche in the constant question What does a particular will want? This question is not directed towards a goal, a motive, or an object. Instead, it affirms *difference*; this is a way of being in the world aligned to what Nietzsche calls *noble morality*, antithetic to *slave morality*.

Slave morality is the morality of utility. It is often ruled by reactive forces, has a pessimistic mistrust of the entire [human] situation and is characterized by a type of gregariousness that is born out of cowardice rather than genuine solidarity for others. Noble morality is instead prevalently made up of *active forces*, by the *sheer pleasure of knowing oneself different*. It *creates* values; it has at its centre the feeling of plenitude, of power which seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would like to give away and bestow. Despite what it is commonly believed in relation to Nietzsche, there is

compassion within his noble morality “but not, or almost not, from pity, but more from an urge begotten by superfluity of power” (Deleuze). It is instead a compassion born out of plenitude, overflowing energy: *generosity* rather than moral obligation.

I have noticed how tempting it is for some of us to make of Nietzsche the champion of a self-styled and preposterous notion of imagined, egotistical ‘nobility’, and then proceed to extol or revile his writings accordingly. In my understanding, the noble morality he writes about has little to do with either those self-actualized, fully-functioning, authentic persons out there, or with plain and simple immorality and disregard of fellow humans.

Above all, there are two traits, closely linked to one another, that characterize Nietzsche’s ‘noble person’: (1) a move away from the “Bad air! Bad air!” of *ressentiment* and the spirit of revenge that seek (moral) blame and is fixated on causation; (2) a profound, un-gregarious appreciation of (one’s own and others’) *difference*. The latter is not appreciation of uniqueness of the kind favoured by the fashion industry or the current psychotherapy industry alike. It is an incitement to evaluate and interpret the ongoing becoming of forces that at different times come to constitute our ‘individuality’.

Playing and dancing

Like Pascal before him (‘the heart has its reasons that reason does not understand’), Kierkegaard spawned a fiercely poetic resistance to the double-headed tyranny of reason and morality that characterize the philosophical and religious tradition in the West. Yet both thinkers are thoroughly ensnared inside the net of interiority. Interiority is a *spider* and neither Pascal nor Kierkegaard, for all the irresistible beauty and intensity of their trajectory, ever break free of its metaphysical ruse but erect their philosophy on its basis. Both of them require all the facets of the interiority drama: “anguish, wailing, guilt, [and] all the forms of dissatisfaction” (Deleuze). Nietzsche moves one step ahead. Not content with presenting an opposition to morality and reason, his work invalidates the main prejudice, the atomistic notion of the self. This brings about a wholly different style and a different course of action, both thoroughly disengaged from Christianity. Pascal proposes a wager while Nietzsche tells us, through Zarathustra, that he loves those who are embarrassed when the dice fall in their favour for they do not want to win, but “perish”.

Kierkegaard invites those of us who dare to take a leap and follow the knight of faith in leaving aside the mores and conformities of our tribe, while Nietzsche, distrustful of any tyrannically stern god, will be moved only by a deity who will make him want to dance:

“Nietzsche’s thought is not about betting but *playing*; not leaping but *dancing*” (Deleuze).
While Pascal bets, Nietzsche plays; while Kierkegaard leaps, Nietzsche dances...

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Manu will facilitate a nine week experiential/theoretical course on Nietzsche titled *The Labyrinth and the Mask*, Thursdays 7-9pm from 19th April at 10, Harley Street London W1G 1PF. Email: info@therapyharleystreet.co.uk for more information. *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy* will be published by Karnac in the summer 2018. www.manubazzano.com