

On Bridging the “Is–Ought” Gap

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The philosophical problem of normativity is “How can the Is-Ought gap be bridged?” David Hume raised the question as to whether we can build up an ethical structure on a sound philosophical foundation, *independently of externally imposed morals*. Of all philosophers, I believe that Friedrich Nietzsche has gone furthest to bridging the gap. This may seem to be a very controversial stance, but I believe that it is one which can be thoroughly justified.

Nietzsche’s friend and one-time lover Lou Andreas-Salome wrote of him that, “In Nietzsche there dwelt in continual warfare, side by side of one another and in turn tyrannising over one another, a musician of high talent, a thinker with a free orientation, a religious genius, and a born poet.”¹ A free-thinker, certainly. A born poet, yes; *Thus Spake Zarathustra* would stand alone as great literature. Unfortunately, any music he produced has apparently been lost, so that must remain an open question. But a religious genius? Wasn’t Nietzsche the atheist who is famous (or infamous) for having said “God is dead”?²

Yes and no. This is a much subtler statement than it would first appear. To understand Nietzsche’s thinking, one must look at where he was coming from. His father, an uncle, and a grandfather were Lutheran pastors. He was deeply indoctrinated by Christianity from childhood, but he sloughed off that heritage and subsequently became one of the greatest free thinkers of the 19th century. He had an intense loathing for orthodox Christian dogma, and this forced him to break away from Christian morals to develop his own ethos from first principles. He called this project the “revaluation of all values.” In reference to the more progressive thinkers of the 19th century, Will Durant sums up Nietzsche’s approach: “These men were brave enough to reject Christian theology, but they did not dare to be logical, to reject moral ideas, the worship of meekness and gentleness and altruism, which had grown out of that theology. They ceased to be Anglicans, or Catholics, or Lutherans; but they did not dare cease to be Christians.”³

As another indication of where he was coming from, he acknowledged his debt to his intellectual “ancestors” who had gone before: “When I speak of Plato, Pascal, Spinoza, and Goethe, then I know that their blood rolls in mine” and “My ancestors: Heraclitus, Empedocles, Spinoza, Goethe.”⁴ One of Nietzsche’s key teachers was Heraclitus. A core concept of Heraclitus was “Things taken together are whole and not whole, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in harmony and in discord. Out of all things comes a unity, and out of a unity all things.”⁵

In other words, reality had to be seen at the same time as both a “One” and a “Many,” a plurality within a unity. Very much in sympathy with this concept, Plato wrote, “I am myself a great lover of these processes of [reductionism] and [holism]; they help me to speak and think. And if I find any man who is able to see ‘a One and a Many’ in Nature, him I follow, and ‘walk in his footsteps as if he were a god.’ And those who have this art, I have hitherto been in the habit of calling dialecticians.”⁶

This concept was at the core of Nietzsche’s development. The philosopher William James rightly stated that the problem of the One and the Many, of monism and pluralism, is “the most central of all philosophical problems,” in that the answer given to it profoundly influences the approach and answers to all other philosophical problems.⁷

Arguably, the philosophical concept of the one and the many interpreted in more spiritual terms is panentheism. It has been acknowledged that Nietzsche's ideas are panentheistic: "From its inception, evolutionary Panentheism, however named, has influenced and found powerful expression among poets such as Wordsworth... Coleridge... Blake... Yeats... Hölderlin... Novalis... Hugo... Whitman; philosophers such as Emerson and Nietzsche."⁸ And in Nietzsche's own words:

We are really for a brief moment primordial Being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal Will... In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the **one** living Being, with whose creative joy we are united.⁹

On the other hand, there is a crucial sense in which Nietzsche would deeply resent the term "religion" being associated with his ideas. The word religion comes from the Latin *re-ligare*, "to bind." On the contrary, Nietzsche would expect any real thinker to be free. After his own experience with his upbringing, the last thing he would want is for a thinker to be bound to anyone, anything, and in particular, any religion.

What "profound influence" then did the synthesis of monism and pluralism have on Nietzsche's philosophy? It is this: to Nietzsche, there is a rational way to act within his reality of the synthesis of the one and many. The one is necessarily *amoral*, because there is nothing else with which to relate. The British philosopher F. H. Bradley expresses this from another viewpoint:

But how do we know that the Absolute is in any sense good? Actually Bradley denied that it was, in any proper meaning of the term, in which it stands for a contrast which holds only within the human sphere. Yet he did call the Absolute perfect. Essentially his line of thought is that all defects in individuals come from their finitude and conflicts with each other, from which arise such evils as malice, despair and so forth. The Absolute cannot be frustrated, since there is nothing beyond itself, it cannot strive, because it experiences itself in an eternal Now, which includes the strains of temporal existence within it, as we may hear a melody in a single act of apprehension, but which cannot as a whole be straining after anything and must therefore be content with itself, and therefore find nothing within itself not satisfactory when seen in context.¹⁰

However, in its furthest development, such a philosophy might oftentimes be manifested in what would appear to be "acting in a moral way." Here we should distinguish "morals," which are necessarily *externally imposed*, from "principles," which are *internally generated*. Nietzsche's aim is to build the "sovereign individual" who acts not because he is bound by social mores but because he is a master of his own "self." This philosopher would look at the "other" (including, but not just limited to, people) and see himself reflected. If he accepted the principle of "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you," it would be solely because of its rationality, not as any "eleventh commandment." This standpoint is necessarily "Beyond Good and Evil": "Denying morality's normative authority is crucial to Nietzsche's critique. For he thinks that complying with morality is inimical to realizing the highest values—and, therefore, that those free spirits capable of realizing such values ought not comply with morality."¹¹

Nietzsche believed in nobility, and that the noble must inherit the earth if humanity is to progress. Nobility is defined as those who are, by nature, highly civilized, emotionally and intellectually strong, and spiritual. Again, some of Nietzsche's words are apposite: "He who is spiritually rich and independent is also the most powerful man in any case" and also,

I have found strength where one does not look for it: in simple, mild, and pleasant people, without the least desire to rule—and, conversely, the desire to rule has often appeared to me a sign of inward weakness: they fear their own slave soul and shroud it in a royal cloak (in the end, they still become the slaves of their followers, their fame, etc.). The powerful natures dominate, it is a necessity, they need not lift one finger. Even if, during their lifetime, they bury themselves in a garden house.¹²

Nietzsche's concept of nobility has nothing to do with social class: "...and it is possible that even yet there is more relative nobility of taste, and more tact for reverence among the people, among the lower classes of the people, especially among peasants, than among the newspaper-reading demimonde of intellect, the cultured class."¹³ To Nietzsche, strength (or power) is something which is to be gained by overcoming *oneself*, not others. (Nietzsche's ideas of the "Will to Power" were totally misunderstood and misappropriated by the Nazis, and this fact has given his philosophy an undeserved reputation within the English-speaking world.) As Walter Kaufmann puts it, his term "master race" was meant to refer to "a future, internationally mixed, race of philosophers and artists who cultivate iron self-control."¹⁴

Thus Nietzsche's ideas, incomplete as they are, point towards a spiritual, amoral and non-religious framework which begins to rationally bridge the *Is-Ought* gap. Others have tried to build on Nietzsche's embryonic system, so far with little success. But it will be done: "All our great teachers and predecessors have at last come to a stop... It will be the same with you and me! But what does that matter to you and me! Other birds will fly farther!"¹⁵

NOTES

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3. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1926).
4. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
6. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, eds., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997).
7. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
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9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (E. W. Fritzsche, 1872).

10. T. L. S. Sprigge, *Theories of Existence* (London: Penguin Books, 1984).
11. Simon Robertson, "Normativity for Nietzschean Free Spirits," <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0020174X.2011.628080?journalCode=sinq20>.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass* (Fall 1860).
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Lindenhurst, NY: Tribeca Books, 2010).
14. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950).
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Maudemarie Clark, ed. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012).