

WHY WAS BERTRAND RUSSELL WRONG ABOUT NIETZSCHE?

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Abstract

This paper discusses Bertrand Russell's critique against Nietzsche's philosophy. In his critique, Russell gives voice to the common interpretation that describes Nietzsche as an insecure man, motivated by hatred against Christianity, fear of moral values etc. Unfortunately, this approach rushes to conclusions that show disdain for the man as well as for the philosopher. Regarding the idea that Nietzsche, with his "Übermensch" concept, is a forerunner of the Nazi thinking is rejected with arguments that show that the nobility of that uniquely beautiful being has its origin in a compounded image of the great men from the past and has nothing to do with the super race of "blond beasts". Also, Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity is not directed toward Christ, but mostly at the concept of permanent humility that is so unnatural for man.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Russell, Übermensch, modern philosophy.

Bertrand Russell in his "**A History of Western Philosophy**" (1945), describes Nietzsche as an insecure man, motivated by hatred against Christianity, fear of moral values etc. In his critique of Nietzsche's books, Russell rushes to conclusions that, unfortunately, show disdain for the man as well as for the philosopher. Some English and German scholars underscore the fact that Russell did not study carefully Nietzsche's works. I agree with this point of view. After listening to Russell's recorded conference about Nietzsche, I discovered that some of his statements show clearly that he misses, among many other things, the main idea of Nietzsche's "**Also Sprach Zarathustra**" (1883-1885), in which the philosopher becomes a poet whose love and dream for the beauty and perfection of a special and "unique man" make him a prophet who envisions "the birth and the future existence" of such an ideal being.

Like communist thinkers of the Stalinist era, Russell considers the German philosopher a reactionary, the one who inspired what will become the doctrine of Nazi Germany. Moreover,

Russell's critique of "**The Antichrist**" (1895), displays, I'm sorry but not shy to say, ignorance about the reason why the book was written, and, of course, what, in fact, is the substance of it.

What triggered my strong repulsion to Russell's statements is, first of all, my profound admiration for Nietzsche's philosophy, for his intellectual curiosity, for his incomparable genius as a writer, his love for music, in short, all of the above, that, when put together, make him unique. Secondly, Russell's ostentatious contempt toward Nietzsche, heard in his "famous" (I rather call it infamous) speech, or, displayed in his written opinions, shows arrogance, ignorance, lack of respect for the truth. Bertrand Russell, the so called "lover of universal peace", the man who tried to make mathematics a system of logic thought, is shown to be viciously unfair, pitiful, and lowered himself to the level of pamphlet writers. It was, unfortunately for me, very unpleasant listening to Russell's "barking" about Nietzsche's philosophy. (His recorded voice sounds harsh, like that of a high tenor in bad shape). Here are three quotations from Russell's critique on Nietzsche's works:

„He attempts to combine two sets of values which are not easily harmonized: on the one hand he likes ruthlessness, war, and aristocratic pride; on the other hand, he loves philosophy and literature and the arts, especially music. Historically, these values coexisted in the Renaissance; Pope Julius II, fighting for Bologna and employing Michelangelo, might be taken as the sort of man whom Nietzsche would wish to see in control of governments. It is natural to compare Nietzsche with Machiavelli, in spite of important differences between the two men... Both have an ethic which aims at power and is deliberately anti-Christian, though Nietzsche is more frank in this respect. What Caesar Borgia

was to Machiavelli, Napoleon was to Nietzsche: a great man defeated by petty opponents.

...It is necessary for higher men to make war upon the masses, and resist the democratic tendencies of the age, for in all directions mediocre people are joining hands to make themselves masters... He regards compassion as a weakness to be combated... He prophesied with a certain glee an era of great wars; one wonders whether he would have been happy if he had lived to see the fulfillment of his prophecy."

He condemns Christian love because he thinks it is an outcome of fear... It does not occur to Nietzsche as possible that a man should genuinely feel universal love, obviously because he himself feels almost universal hatred and fear, which he would fain disguise as lordly indifference. His "noble" man - who is himself in day-dreams - is a being wholly devoid of sympathy, ruthless, cunning, concerned only with his own power. King Lear, on the verge of madness, says: "I will do such things - what they are yet I know not - but they shall be the terror of the earth." This is Nietzsche's philosophy in a nutshell.¹

I will discuss these opinions briefly hoping that the reader will do his or her own research on this subject.

About Nietzsche's *Übermensch*: Well, to make it clear from the beginning, the philosopher never contemplated that such a being would be of German origin. The bourgeois state of mind in Germany during Nietzsche's life was deeply disliked by him. His *Übermensch* has nothing to do with the "blond beast" that came into being about 30 years after his death. I quote from "The Antichrist": *These Germans, I confess, are my enemies: I despise all their uncleanness in concept and valuation, their cowardice before every honest yea and nay. For nearly a thousand years they have tangled and confused everything their fingers have touched; they have on their conscience all the half-way measures, all the three-eighths-way measures, that Europe is sick of, - they also have on their conscience the uncleanest variety of Christianity that exists, and the most incurable and indestructible -*

Protestantism.... If mankind never manages to get rid of Christianity the Germans will be to blame... Here it becomes necessary to call up a memory that must be a hundred times more painful to Germans. The Germans have destroyed for Europe the last great harvest of civilization that Europe was ever to reap - the Renaissance...²

It is obvious that Russell did not read these lines (or willingly ignored them), which demonstrate vividly that Nietzsche never dreamt about the horror caused by the Germans that came to be the Second World War. Hitler's *Übermensch* was not the one described in "**Also Sprach Zarathustra**". The nobility of that uniquely beautiful being has its origin in a compounded image of the great men from the past and has nothing to do with the super race of "blond beasts". Bertrand Russell shows bad faith or, if an excuse can be employed on his behalf, superficiality, to say the least.

Another reason why Russell disliked Nietzsche is caused by the low esteem the German philosopher had for the English way of thinking. The following are quotations from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886):

„English clumsiness and peasant seriousness is still disguised most tolerably - or rather elucidated and reinterpreted - by the language of Christian gestures and by prayers and singing of psalms. And for those brutes of sot and rakes who formerly learned how to grunt morally under the sway of Methodism and more recently again as a «Salvation Army», a penitential spasm may really be the relatively highest achievement of humanity to which they can be raised: that much may be conceded in all fairness. But what is offensive even in the most humane Englishman is his lack of music, speaking metaphorically (but not only metaphorically): in the movements of his soul and body he has no rhythm and dance, indeed not even the desire for rhythm and dance, for «music». Listen to him speak; watch the most beautiful Englishwomen walk - there are no more beautiful doves and swans in any country in the world - finally listen to them sing! But I am asking too much..."

*European noblesse-of feeling, of taste, of manners, taking the word, in short, in every higher sense – is the work and invention of France; European vulgarity, the plebeianism of modern ideas, that of England.*³

These lines explain Russell's animosity towards Nietzsche! There are many philosophers, like Heidegger, who believe that the end of metaphysical thought is to be found in Nietzsche's works. Heidegger considers Nietzsche, by far, the greatest philosopher after Plato. He regards Nietzsche's unique understanding of the "eternal recurrence", as well as his conclusion that we should be more interested in the "*becoming*", rather than in the "*being*", of crucial importance. He concludes that Nietzsche's philosophy seems to be ontological in nature.

The philosopher's preoccupation with art and music is due to his understanding of their importance in life itself. His profound analysis of the Apollinic and Dionysiac, in his first book "**The Birth of Tragedy**", (1872) is, probably, the most comprehensive in the history of literature. One cannot separate man from the best of what he ever created, which is music and the arts. There is no contradiction between the nobility of a proud warrior and his love for the beauty of music, theatre and the arts. The "Will to Power" coexists in the soul of a superior human being, with the love of music.

In spite of recognizing their parallel existence during the Renaissance, Russell's assumption of a direct conflict between these qualities, shows contempt for the truth, as presented by Nietzsche, and, therefore, proves to be unjustified. It is sad but, as on many other occasions, he distorts willingly Nietzsche's thoughts and intentions. This is even more obvious when he objects to the German philosopher's dislike for Christian doctrine, stating that Nietzsche fears love for humanity, and does not understand the manifestation of compassion found in the teachings of Christ. How false and far from the truth is Russell's attempt to present Nietzsche as a man who hates all that is good in human nature. Let me briefly clarify what in fact are Nietzsche's thoughts about the Christian doctrine:

Nietzsche accuses Christianity of falsifying the truth about the universe around us, creating

an imaginary world where the *real existence* is just of "*a pure spirit*". He explains that "*pure spirit is pure lie*"! As a consequence he affirms that humanity is part of the animal kingdom and its origin has nothing to do with a... "holy spirit", "divinity", in short, with the supernatural. Therefore a mind of a healthy and skeptical human being will never accept replacing the truth about the world with a lie. Christianity affirms the existence of "*unreal causes*" for the existence of life, like... God, soul, Holy Spirit, and for men who do not obey the will of Their Maker, "*imaginary effects*" such as sin and punishment. Grace and forgiveness are rendered to those who obey his laws etc. Temptation **must** be followed by redemption! The "*clean in spirit*" will be accepted in the Kingdom of God while the sinners will go to Hell. Before the last moment of its existence humanity will endure the Apocalypse. Finally Nietzsche concludes that "*this entire fictional world has its roots in the hatred of the natural world*", a hatred which reveals its origin: "*Who alone has any reason for living his way out of reality? The man who suffers under it*".⁴

In Greek Mythology the Gods have feelings, like humans. They are representing the highest aspirations for men. These Gods have mighty powers, live in heavens, but otherwise display all qualities or failures of human beings. The Christian doctrine, however cannot accept a God whose action reminds one of human behavior. The difference between Zeus or Apollo and the Christian God is that the last one does not have any desires for sex, has no appetite for life, has nothing to do with human needs. The Christian God, "*the divinity of decadence*", represents a Mighty God who contradicts life itself. The slaves, the impotent people, the creators of such image of God, their own, do not want to call themselves "*the weak*", so they become "*the good*". *Mankind has just as much need for an evil god as for a good god; it doesn't have to thank mere tolerance and humanitarianism for its own existence... What would be the value of a god who knew nothing of anger, revenge, envy, scorn, cunning, violence? Who had perhaps never experienced the rapturous ardeurs of victory and*

*of destruction? No one would understand such a god: why should any one want him?*⁵

Nietzsche admires Christ who expressed no bitterness or hostility toward those who arrested and made him suffer. He did not seek to have his followers avenge his death. Paul though, changes Christ's message. He corrupted his intentions and the Christian doctrine was distorted by his will, by his need for power. Christianity is a religion which has no understanding for, or contact with reality at any point. Therefore "must naturally be a mortal enemy of "the wisdom of the world", in other words, "of science". Science, in conclusion, predisposes all kinds of threats to the Christian dogma. As a consequence this dogma disputes by all means the "disciplining of the intellect" and intellectual freedom that may come to being because of the truth found in science.

The fable of Eve's temptation, found in Genesis, proves its significance when understood fully: *It is "God's mortal terror of science"!* What scares the priest is the power of the human intellect. It is the greatest danger for Christianity. Knowledge is the *first sin*, the *original sin*.

"Thou shall not know"!!!

*Has any one ever clearly understood the celebrated story at the beginning of the Bible - of God's mortal terror of science? ...No one, in fact, has understood it. This priest-book par excellence opens, as is fitting, with the great inner difficulty of the priest: he faces only one great danger; ergo, God faces only one great danger.*⁶

*"Faith' means the will to avoid what is true"*⁷

When it comes to Christianity, Nietzsche's criticism is especially harsh regarding Paul's profound distortion of Christ's wishes. He demonstrates that Christianity, the way we know it, is, in fact, Paul's doctrine that caused a great part of humanity to become weak in spirit, lacking pride, renouncing happiness during earthly life, in which men "*must be humble, asking for forgiveness*", even when sin was not committed ("*because men are born as a result of an original sin*"). It is important to observe that Nietzsche's criticism is not directed toward

Christ, but mostly at the concept of permanent humility that is so unnatural for man. The concept of the weak, who, on his knees, waits for forgiveness from "*His Maker*" has been repugnant to him. In spite of his dislike of Catholicism, Nietzsche gives credit to the great achievements of the Renaissance, in part, sponsored by the Catholic Church. He is disgusted with Luther's "*Reform*" that shows intransigence for the beauty of the arts which... "*distract the righteous*" from their main mission to be "*humble sheep*", asking all the time for God's forgiveness! His irony is extraordinary, when narrating about the Catholic Church, which ordered the public baths to be destroyed in Alhambra... (the Moors loved to bathe)... because this kind of "*physical indulgence*" contradicted the teaching of being humble and preoccupied only with "*God's desires*". Nietzsche admires Greek Civilization, the achievements of the Roman Empire, but is disgusted with the reactionary doctrine of the Christian Church that was instrumental in the destruction of ancient Rome. "*All the labour of Antiquity in vain. I have no words to express my feelings at such a catastrophe*". ("*The Antichrist*").

In conclusion, as arrogant as it may appear, I state without any doubt that Bertrand Russell was unfair and mostly uninformed about the scope and importance of Nietzsche who, maybe, was too much for him. Russell's "*obese*" volume on Western Philosophy (895 pages), is in many respects superficial, though written with some wit.

Qui trop embrasse mal étreint!

April 26, 2012, New York

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Endnotes

- 1 Bertrand Russell, *A History of the Western Philosophy*, Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1945.
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (61), Translation by H.L. Mencken, 1918, Download from Free Encyclopedia.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (252, 253), translation by W. Kaufmann, Random House, Vintage books, 1886, p. 192, 193.
- 4 *Idem*, *The Antichrist* (15).
- 5 *Ibidem* (16).
- 6 *Ibidem* (48).
- 7 *Ibidem* (52).