Morality as Anti-Nature

By Friedrich Nietzsche
From Twilight Of The Idols • 1889

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, famous for his heavy criticism of the morality propagated by Christianity. In the excerpt below from his book Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche seeks to challenge, unravel and completely do away with the moral notions of his day. However, Nietzsche was not a nihilist or a relativist. Rather, he proposed a humanistic “life-affirming” morality that comprised every part of man: the mind and the body, the animalistic and the divine. As you read, think about where our moral notions come from. Which aspects of our human nature do we suppress? Which do we embrace?

All passions have a phase when they are merely disastrous, when they drag down their victim with the weight of stupidity—and a later, very much later phase when they wed the spirit, when they “spiritualize” themselves. Formerly, in view of the element of stupidity in passion, war was declared on passion itself, its destruction was plotted; all the old moral monsters are agreed on this: il faut tuer les passions. The most famous formula for this is to be found in the New Testament, in that Sermon on the Mount, where, incidentally, things are by no means looked at from a height. There it is said, for example, with particular reference to sexuality: “If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out.” Fortunately, no Christian acts in accordance with this precept. Destroying the passions and cravings, merely as a preventive measure against their stupidity and the unpleasant consequences of this stupidity—today this itself strikes us as merely another acute form of stupidity. We no longer admire dentists who “pluck out” teeth so that they will not hurt any more.

To be fair, it should be admitted, however, that on the ground out of which Christianity grew, the concept of the “spiritualization of passion” could never have been formed. After all, the first church, as is well known, fought against the “intelligent” in favor of the “poor in spirit.” How could one expect from it an intelligent war against passion? The church fights passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its “cure,” is castratism. It never asks: “How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a craving?” It has at all times laid the stress of discipline on extirpation (of sensuality, of pride, of the lust to rule, of avarice, of vengefulness). But an attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life: the practice of the church is hostile to life.

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1. Nihilist (noun): one who rejects all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless
2. Relativist (noun): one who believes that points of view have no absolute truth or validity, having only relative, subjective value according to differences in perception and consideration
3. Passions (noun): in this context, strong emotions or desires
4. “We must kill passion.” (French)
5. Precept (noun): a rule that governs behavior
6. Excision (noun): cutting out, surgical removal
7. Here, Nietzsche figuratively refers to Church policies of abstinence and general repression of sexuality.
8. Deify (verb): to make holy, or godlike
The same means in the fight against a craving—castration, extirpation—is instinctively chosen by those who are too weak-willed, too degenerate\textsuperscript{11}, to be able to impose moderation on themselves; by those who are so constituted that they require \textit{La Trappe}\textsuperscript{12}, to use a figure of speech, or (without any figure of speech) some kind of definitive declaration of hostility, a cleft between themselves and the passion. Radical means are indispensable only for the degenerate; the weakness of the will—or, to speak more definitely, the inability not to respond to a stimulus—is itself merely another form of degeneration. The radical hostility, the deadly hostility against sensuality, is always a symptom to reflect on: it entitles us to suppositions\textsuperscript{13} concerning the total state of one who is excessive in this manner.

This hostility, this hatred, by the way, reaches its climax only when such types lack even the firmness for this radical cure, for this renunciation\textsuperscript{14} of their “devil.” One should survey the whole history of the priests and philosophers, including the artists: the most poisonous things against the senses have been said not by the impotent\textsuperscript{15}, nor by ascetics\textsuperscript{16}, but by the impossible ascetics, by those who really were in dire need of being ascetics.

The spiritualization of sensuality is called love: it represents a great triumph over Christianity. Another triumph is our spiritualization of hostility. It consists in a profound appreciation of the value of having enemies: in short, it means acting and thinking in the opposite way from that which has been the rule. The church always wanted the destruction of its enemies; we, we immoralists and Antichristians, find our advantage in this, that the church exists. In the political realm too, hostility has now become more spiritual—much more sensible, much more thoughtful, much more considerate. Almost every party understands how it is in the interest of its own self-preservation that the opposition should not lose all strength; the same is true of power politics. A new creation in particular—the new \textit{Reich}\textsuperscript{17}, for example—needs enemies more than friends: in opposition alone does it feel itself necessary, in opposition alone does it become necessary.

Our attitude to the “internal enemy” is no different: here too we have spiritualized hostility; here too we have come to appreciate its value. The price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition; one remains young only as long as the soul does not stretch itself and desire peace. Nothing has become more alien to us than that desideratum\textsuperscript{18} of former times, “peace of soul,” the Christian desideratum; there is nothing we envy less than the moralistic cow and the fat happiness of the good conscience. One has renounced the great life when one renounces war.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{9. Extirpation (noun):} destruction, removal
  \item \textbf{10. Avarice (noun):} greed
  \item \textbf{11. Degenerate (adjective):} lacking moral fiber
  \item \textbf{12. La Trappe} is a Roman Catholic religious order of monks who practice extreme self-restraint.
  \item \textbf{13. Suppositions (noun):} assumptions, conclusions
  \item \textbf{14. Renunciation (noun):} rejection
  \item \textbf{15. Impotent (adjective):} unable to have sex
  \item \textbf{16. Ascetics (noun):} a group of Christians who completely rejected physical comfort and pleasure, sometimes even inflicting discomfort and pain on themselves.
  \item \textbf{17. Reich} is German for realm or empire.
  \item \textbf{18. Desideratum (noun):} something that is needed or wanted
\end{itemize}
In many cases, to be sure, “peace of soul” is merely a misunderstanding—something else, which lacks only a more honest name. Without further ado or prejudice, a few examples. “Peace of soul” can be, for one, the gentle radiation of a rich animality\(^{19}\) into the moral (or religious) sphere. Or the beginning of weariness, the first shadow of evening, of any kind of evening. Or a sign that the air is humid, that south winds are approaching. Or unrecognized gratitude for a good digestion (sometimes called “love of man”). Or the attainment of calm by a convalescent\(^{20}\) who feels a new relish in all things and waits. Or the state which follows a thorough satisfaction of our dominant passion, the well-being of a rare repletion. Or the senile\(^{21}\) weakness of our will, our cravings, our vices. Or laziness, persuaded by vanity to give itself moral airs. Or the emergence of certainty, even a dreadful certainty, after long tension and torture by uncertainty. Or the expression of maturity and mastery in the midst of doing, creating, working, and willing—calm breathing, attained “freedom of the will.” Twilight of the Idols\(^{22}\)—who knows? Perhaps also only a kind of “peace of soul.”

I reduce a principle to a formula. Every naturalism in morality—that is, every healthy morality—is dominated by an instinct of life, some commandment of life is fulfilled by a determinate canon of “shalt” and “shalt not”; some inhibition and hostile element on the path of life is thus removed. Anti-natural morality—that is, almost every morality which has so far been taught, revered, and preached—turns, conversely, against the instincts of life: it is condemnation of these instincts, now secret, now outspoken and impudent\(^{23}\). When it says, “God looks at the heart,” it says “no” to both the lowest and the highest desires of life, and posits God as the enemy of life. The saint in whom God delights is the ideal eunuch.\(^{24}\) Life has come to an end where the “kingdom of God” begins.

Once one has comprehended the outrage of such a revolt against life as has become almost sacrosanct\(^{25}\) in Christian morality, one has, fortunately, also comprehended something else: the futility, apparentness, absurdity, and mendaciousness\(^{26}\) of such a revolt. A condemnation of life by the living remains in the end a mere symptom of a certain kind of life: the question whether it is justified or unjustified is not even raised thereby. One would require a position outside of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the value of life: reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. From this it follows that even that anti-natural morality which conceives of God as the counter-concept and condemnation of life is only a value judgment of life—but of what life? Of what kind of life? I have already given the answer: of declining, weakened, weary, condemned life. Morality, as it has so far been understood—as it has in the end been formulated once more by Schopenhauer\(^{27}\), as “negation of the will to life”—is the very instinct of decadence\(^{28}\), which makes an imperative of itself. It says: “Perish!” It is a condemnation pronounced by the condemned.

\(^{19}\) Animality (noun): primal, basic part of human nature, animal instincts and desires
\(^{20}\) Convalescent (noun): someone recovering from an illness
\(^{21}\) Senile (adjective): showing a decline or deterioration of physical strength or mental functioning
\(^{22}\) Idol (noun): an image of a deity other than God
\(^{23}\) Impudent (adjective): not showing due respect; impertinent
\(^{24}\) Eunuch (noun): a castrated, abstinent man
\(^{25}\) Sacrosanct (adjective): holy
\(^{26}\) Mendaciousness (noun): dishonesty
\(^{27}\) Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German, atheistic philosopher who had significant impact on Nietzsche’s ideas. He was known for characterizing the phenomenal world, and consequently all human action, as the product of a blind, insatiable, and malignant metaphysical will.
\(^{28}\) Decadence (noun): moral or cultural decline as characterized by excessive indulgence in pleasure or luxury
Let us finally consider how naive it is altogether to say: “Man ought to be such and such!” Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play and change of forms—and some wretched loaf of a moralist comments: “No! Man ought to be different.” He even knows what man should be like, this wretched bigot and prig: he paints himself on the wall and comments, “Ecce homo”\(^\text{30}\) But even when the moralist addresses himself only to the single human being and says to him, “You ought to be such and such!” he does not cease to make himself ridiculous. The single human being is a piece of fatum\(^\text{31}\) from the front and from the rear, one law more, one necessity more for all that is yet to come and to be. To say to him, “Change yourself!” is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively.\(^\text{32}\) And indeed there have been consistent moralists who wanted man to be different, that is, virtuous—they wanted him remade in their own image, as a prig: to that end, they negated the world! No small madness! No modest kind of immodesty!

Morality, insofar as it condemns for its own sake, and not out of regard for the concerns, considerations, and contrivances\(^\text{33}\) of life, is a specific error with which one ought to have no pity—an idiosyncrasy\(^\text{34}\) of degenerates which has caused immeasurable harm.

We others, we immoralists, have, conversely, made room in our hearts for every kind of understanding, comprehending, and approving. We do not easily negate; we make it a point of honor to be affirmers. More and more, our eyes have opened to that economy which needs and knows how to utilize everything that the holy witlessness of the priest, the diseased reason in the priest, rejects—that economy in the law of life which finds an advantage even in the disgusting species of the prigs, the priests, the virtuous. What advantage? But we ourselves, we immoralists, are the answer.

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29. **Prig (noun):** a self-righteously moralistic person who behaves as if superior to others
30. **“Behold Man!” (Latin Phrase).** This is the title of a famous painting of Christ—Nietzsche employs this phrase both to describe the actions of the moralist and accuse Christians of being the worst moralists of all.
31. **Fate, destiny (Latin)**
32. **Retroactively (adverb):** working from back to front, from present to past
33. **Contrivances (noun):** things that come about
34. **Idiosyncrasy (noun):** something strange, unusual or quirky
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: One of the central ideas of the text is that morality as it is taught to society goes against our human nature. Which of the following best states another central idea of the text?
   A. Humanity should not be governed by any morality; humans should indulge in whatever impulses come naturally to them.
   B. Those who purport to be moralists often behave the least morally.
   C. Passions and desires should be avoided in order to achieve moral perfection.
   D. To live “morally” – or according to Christian dogma – is to devalue life.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotations best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “Destroying the passions and cravings, merely as a preventive measure against their stupidity and the unpleasant consequences of this stupidity—today this itself strikes us as merely another acute form of stupidity.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “An attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life: the practice of the church is hostile to life.” (Paragraph 2)
   C. “Every naturalism in morality—that is, every healthy morality—is dominated by an instinct of life.” (Paragraph 8)
   D. “But even when the moralist addresses himself only to the single human being and says to him, “You ought to be such and such!” he does not cease to make himself ridiculous.” (Paragraph 10)

3. According to Nietzsche, who is the main culprit of Anti-Natural morality?
   A. The Christian church
   B. The degenerates of society
   C. The anti-moralists
   D. Those who succumb to passion

4. PART A: What does the word “witlessness” mean as it is used in paragraph 12?
   A. Compassion
   B. Stupidity
   C. Devoutness
   D. Repulsion

5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “room in our hearts”
   B. “holy”
   C. “diseased reason”
   D. “disgusting species”
6. In paragraph 7, Nietzsche begins the majority of his sentences with the word “Or...” Why is this structure effective in helping Nietzsche make his argument?
   A. It emphasizes which notions of “peace of soul” are most misunderstood.
   B. It proposes a multitude of alternative ways to view the notion of “peace of soul.”
   C. It contrasts Nietzsche’s conception of “peace of soul” with that of other philosophers.
   D. It criticizes the numerous ways in which humanity is inherently weak and aggressive.

7. Much of this excerpt focuses on Nietzsche’s criticisms of religion and society; however, toward the end of the essay he discusses an alternative morality. Paraphrase these ideas on the lines below, using evidence from the text in your response.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What exactly are the immoralists? Are they bad, or “immoral” people?

2. According to this passage, do you think Nietzsche wanted to do away with the concept of right and wrong?

3. Our society tends to value the individual and her or his experiences. However, certain natural physical appetites and pleasures are viewed as negative. Do we, in our modern society, want to do away with “passion?” Do we tend to be moralists, immoralists, or something in between?

4. Nietzsche heavily critiques the Church. He seems to think that the Church encourages, and forces people to reject their humanity. What do you think Nietzsche would have to say about the Church today? In your opinion, are his criticisms still valid?

5. What are your thoughts on the ideas expressed in the final paragraph? In your opinion, are Nietzsche’s ideas of “immorality” superior? Can one proclaim to make “room in our hearts for every kind of understanding, comprehending, and approving,” while simultaneously renouncing the ideas behind Christian morality?