

“Nothing is true, everything is permitted”... Certainly that was freedom of the mind, with that the termination of the belief in truth was announced.

Friedrich Nietzsche: On the Genealogy of Morality

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his book “On the Genealogy of Morality” claims that in order to achieve a higher level of intellect by directing our minds to unconditional free thinking, and thus becoming what he calls an *Übermensch*, we must first abandon our belief in truth. Thus, this essay will examine Nietzsche’s argument by referring to the realms of ethical, ontological and epistemological philosophy as well as outline a contradiction in Nietzsche’s thought.

During his discussion of asceticism, which is the belief that we must abstain from “worldly pleasure” often due to religious goals in order to find truth and knowledge, Nietzsche uses the motto of the Assassins (a medieval order of warriors that has now entered popular culture through Ubisoft’s games Assassins ‘Creed), that “Nothing is true, everything is permitted”. To better understand this maxim in the context of moral thought we must break it down to two sections:

a) To say that “Nothing is true” means to acknowledge that the universe is non-moral, which means that it contains no inherent moral facts, concepts or qualifications that would dictate us, being external to ourselves, the correct or moral course of action.

b) To say that “Everything is permitted” means to realize that, since there are no inherently moral elements in the universe that could dictate morality, we ourselves as moral agents are solely responsible for our actions and thus we must live with their consequences, whichever they are.

Thus, Nietzsche, as a proto-existentialist, claims that any moral philosophical theory, such as Mill’s Utilitarianism or Kant’s categorical imperative, as well as any code of morality proposed by the world’s religions, especially the ascetic religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism) is both false and misleading because it tries to limit, externally to ourselves, our moral choices. These limitations do not only restrain our freedom of the mind but also, in the case of ascetic religions, oblige us to will to stop willing in the hopes of a better afterlife, a profound contradiction according to the German philosopher. A contradiction that, according to Nietzsche, would be easily understood by the *Übermensch*, the ideal human, who would dismiss the morality of asceticism and enforce his will. This motto, however, progresses beyond the boundaries of morality and enters the realm of ontology and epistemology.

To say that “Nothing is true” in an ontological-epistemological context is to acknowledge that there are no inherently true propositions or facts inside the fabric of reality. This is a radical ontological claim indeed. Nietzsche, following the footsteps of the ancient Greek sophists (especially Heraclitus and Pythagoras), is discarding the belief in and by extension the existence of truth as a property created

and allocated on propositions and entities by our mind. The creation and allocation of the concept of “truth” is derived by the all “too human” psychological desire for certainty. In other words, our desire to believe in the existence of truth, an entity or property that has value in and of itself and constitutes a target because of its nature, has made us oblivious to the fact that it is actually a human-generated “lie” that aims at helping us understand and control the world we live in. In the context of religion this value-giving mechanism has associated –or even identified- truth with God, giving it thus divine properties, while in the context of science truth is also evangelized and idealized as the ultimate purpose and goal of mankind. Thus, Nietzsche’s Übermensch should first abandon any ascetic ideal and any other intellectual limitation before calling into question both the existence and value of truth. Only after realizing the “lie” of truth, could the Übermensch be truly free from any limitations and see reality in its purest form.

At this point, however, Nietzsche’s thought arrives at a profound contradiction. Nietzsche’s Übermensch, in his effort to reach free thinking unbound by any limitations, seems to doubt the belief in and the existence of truth. The problem with this reasoning, however, is the incentive that motivates his action. Instead of discarding truth all together as the quote proposes (“Nothing is true”), the Übermensch seems to be searching for just a purest form of truth, one that is not bound by any ascetic morality or dogmatic assumptions. In other words, Nietzsche’s path of calling into question every knowledge claim, even those about knowledge itself, is motivated by his desire to reach a superior form of knowledge and truth. So, the Übermensch, contrary to its name and Nietzsche’s hopes, is also “all too human” since he cannot escape the faith to truth, that according to Nietzsche is a “lie” (On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense), for he seems unable to progress beyond such faith.

To sum up, after briefly examining Nietzsche’s claim that “Nothing is true, everything is permitted” in the context of the Übermensch and its implications on ontological thought, we arrive at the uneasy conclusion that we are oblivious to the final answer. Even if the Übermensch alludes himself in his endeavor to discard the concept –or “lie”- of truth for he is merely trying to purify it from any arbitrary epistemological or religious claims, Nietzsche’s remark, that the desire of mankind to understand and control the universe could lead to the creation of an absurd concept of truth, remains plausible. Nietzsche, however, is certainly correct at purporting that we must be critical even to knowledge and truth. Following Descartes’ method of doubt in an epistemological and ontological context, we will be able not only to reevaluate our overall corpus of knowledge but also to better understand its impact and role on our lives.

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