

Nietzsche's Critique of the Metaphysical Conception of Freedom

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Summary: 1. The Metaphysical Concept of Freedom; 2. Schopenhauer's Concept of Freedom; 3. Metaphysics Makes Men Unfree; 4. The Fallaciousness of the Metaphysical Concept of Substance; 5. The Critique of Memory and Consciousness; 6. The Critique of Guilt.

Abstract: This article analyzes Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical concept of freedom throughout his works, from *Human, All Too Human* (1878) to *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888). It argues that, in criticizing the metaphysical concept of freedom, Nietzsche aims to target the metaphysical concept of substance that lies at its core. Substance is Nietzsche's real target: while declaring men free, metaphysics actually makes them unfree by conceiving of them as substantial beings. Men are regarded as an unchanging essence, a substance with fixed intentions, from which actions emerge independently from each other in a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*. In light of its substantial conception of men's being, metaphysics deprives men of the freedom to develop their character, personality and ultimately of the freedom to become masters of their own destiny.

Keywords: *substance, language, destiny, Schopenhauer, memory, consciousness, guilt.*

1. The Metaphysical Concept of Freedom

In the aphorism 18 *Fundamental questions of metaphysics* in the first part of the first book of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche affirms that metaphysics defines freedom as follows:

We believe at bottom that all sensations and actions are acts of free will; when the sentient individuum observes itself, it regards every sensation, every change, as something *isolated*, that is to say unconditioned, disconnected: it emerges out of us independently of anything earlier or later¹.

For metaphysics, freedom is a transcendental faculty outside of space and time, lacking any link with the external world, where actions emerge in a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*. This means that they are independent from each other, devoid of any motive, they do indeed just happen *ex nihilo*. As a result, men are considered free insofar as can make decisions autonomously, without being influenced by the external world, by the reality in which they live. It is as if men, on the point of making decisions, raised themselves above reality, as if they did not have any past experience, as if they did not have any past at all. This can be shown considering a brief history of moral sensations:

Thus one successively makes men accountable for the effects they produce, then for their actions, then for their motives, and finally for their nature.

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F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 21-22.

Now one finally discovers that this nature, too, cannot be accountable, inasmuch as it is altogether a necessary consequence and assembled from the elements and influence of things past and present: that is to say, that men can be made accountable for nothing, not for his nature, nor for his motives, nor for his actions, nor for the effects he produces. One has thereby attained to the knowledge that the history of the moral sensations is the history of an error, the error of accountability, which rests on the error of freedom of will².

In its beginnings, metaphysics regarded actions as good or bad because of their useful or harmful consequences. Afterwards, it no longer focused on the consequences but considered good and evil as intrinsic qualities of the actions themselves. At a later stage, it was the motives that were deemed good or bad and, in the end, the whole nature of men. Specifically, men were considered as beings with a given good or bad essence once and for all, with a given unchanging character. In other words, they were considered as fixed substances, without any possibility of changing their nature. Nietzsche then summarizes this brief history of moral sensations, asserting that one «makes men accountable for the effects they produce, then for their actions, then for their motives, and finally for their nature».

2. Schopenhauer's Concept of Freedom

After having examined the history of moral sensations, in the same aphorism Nietzsche takes into account Schopenhauer's concept of free will, to show how the metaphysical conception of freedom is fallacious. Nietzsche considers Schopenhauer one of the foremost representatives of metaphysical thought. In his interpretation, Schopenhauer grounds the existence of free will on the feeling of displeasure that usually follows a bad action. Nietzsche summarizes Schopenhauer's argument: if men were determined by necessity, there would be no ground for such a feeling. To solve this problem, Schopenhauer distinguishes within men *esse* from *operari*, i.e. a sphere of being and a sphere of acting, and locates the feeling of displeasure in the sphere of being. This is a free sphere, not influenced by anything external, while the sphere of acting is determined by a strict necessity. In other words, we have freedom to be, but not freedom to act. According to Schopenhauer, the sphere of being is the most important, and from it derives the sphere of acting. This means that necessity derives from freedom, that «man becomes that which he wills to become, his willing precedes his existence»³. This affirmation, which for Nietzsche recapitulates Schopenhauer's concept of freedom, is crucial for understanding in what respect the metaphysical concept of freedom is fallacious. What Nietzsche criticizes is the division of men into two spheres, that of being and that of acting, that of willing and that of existence. Only on the basis of such a division, do freedom and responsibility make sense within the metaphysical system. Metaphysics in fact considers men as a sphere of fixed intentions outside of space and time, and separates from this sphere the other of actions, which accordingly results the product of a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*, the product of a man deemed above the context in which he lives.

The division between intentions and actions is the same as the division between the sphere of being and the sphere of acting. This division is grounded on the concept of substance: the sphere of being, of intentions, is considered the unchanging core of men, their intimate essence.

² *Ibidem*, p. 34.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

It is conceived of as a fixed, permanent substance, in respect of which actions are something contingent. Here is the real target of Nietzsche: not freedom, not responsibility but substance.

3. Metaphysics Makes Men Unfree

The metaphysical concept of freedom, as based on the concept of substance, makes men substances, beings with a fixed character incapable of changing their nature. This means that metaphysics renders men unfree in actuality, because, by considering them as substances, it denies them the possibility of changing and developing their personality, and ultimately of determining their own destiny. For metaphysics, our destiny has been already written in our being, whose characteristics have been determined for all eternity. Hence, metaphysics turns out to ultimately deprive men of the freedom to be masters of their own destiny. In opposition to the metaphysical concept of freedom, Nietzsche asserts that men's nature «is altogether a necessary consequence and assembled from the elements and influence of things past and present». With these words, Nietzsche affirms the complete irresponsibility of men for their actions: men can be made accountable for nothing. This does not mean that, for Nietzsche, men are necessarily determined and thus no freedom can be ascribed to them, but that, unlike metaphysics, there are not two spheres within them, that of the intentions on one side and that of the actions on the other side. No one can be made accountable for his deeds, because there is no substantial being to which responsibility can be ascribed. Men's being is not determined in all eternity but is as contingent as their actions: it continuously changes depending on the actions performed. In fact, there is no man, because there is no fixed character. Men are not fixed substances separated from contingent actions. Men *are* their actions. There is no *esse* before *operari* but *esse* is *operari*: men are ultimately what they do. The essence of men is not a fixed being, an unchanging character, but a continuous becoming. As a result, men are in control of themselves, they can decide how to shape their character, destiny is in their own hands. In brief, Nietzsche criticizes the metaphysical concept of freedom to affirm men's freedom to become masters of their own destiny.

Mohammedan fatalism embodies the fundamental error of setting man and fate over against one another as two separate things [...]. In reality every man is himself a piece of fate; when he thinks to resist fate in the way suggested, it is precisely fate that is here fulfilling itself; the struggle is imaginary, but so is the proposed resignation to fate; all these imaginings are enclosed within fate. [...] You yourself, poor fearful man, are the implacable *moira* enthroned even above the gods that governs all that happens⁴.

In conceiving of men as beings with a fixed, unchanging essence, incapable of determining their own destiny, metaphysics turns out to embrace the conception of fate affirmed by what Nietzsche calls «Mohammedan fatalism». According to the latter, fate is a transcendental entity that *ab aeterno* determines men's destiny.

Men and fate are thought to be two things diametrically opposed, and, as a result, men can only choose between two different behaviours: either they seek to fight against it (despite the knowledge that fate will always triumph in the end), or they resign themselves to it.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 325.

However, fate, Nietzsche argues, is not what Mohammedan fatalism deems it to be. Fate is not a transcendental entity that takes control of men's destiny for all eternity. Rather, it is men who are in control of their own fate: they are free to shape their own destiny as they wish. In other words, they themselves are their own *moira*. The latter is an ancient Greek word that means "assigned portion of fate". The ancient Greeks believed that a transcendental entity called *moira* allocated a determined portion of destiny to each man at birth. Contrary to their beliefs, Nietzsche argues that it is men who assign to themselves their own portion of destiny, i.e. it is men, and not something external to them, who have the power to determine their own destiny.

4. The Fallaciousness of the Metaphysical Concept of Substance

In the aphorism 11 *Freedom of will and isolation of facts* in the second part of the second book of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche states *apertis verbis* that, in criticizing the metaphysical concept of freedom, he is actually targeting the concept of substance, which is the cornerstone of Mohammedan fatalism. Considering men as substances not only prevents them from becoming masters of their own destiny but it is also fallacious, since substance is a concept invented by metaphysics. In nature, there is no substance.

Now, belief in freedom of will is incompatible precisely with the idea of a continuous, homogeneous, undivided, indivisible flowing: it presupposes that *every individual action is isolate and indivisible*; it is an atomism in the domain of willing and knowing. [...] Through words and concepts we are still continually misled into imagining things as being simpler than they are, separate from one another, indivisible, each existing in and for itself. A philosophical mythology lies concealed in *language* [...]. Belief in freedom of will - that is to say in *identical* facts and in *isolated* facts - has in language its constant evangelist and advocate⁵.

For metaphysics, the concept of substance, that is, of something fixed that never changes, is a given truth. It exists per se, independently of our ability to grasp it. On the contrary, Nietzsche asserts that it is a human, all too human concept, a concept invented by humans. The origin of the concept of substance lies within language. The elementary linguistic sentence consists of subject, object and verb. The subject comes from the Latin *subjectum*, that is, a substance, something permanent that lies at the bottom of something else. On the other side, the object derives from the Latin *objectum*, which in turn derives from the ancient Greek ἀντιχείμενον meaning something that opposes something else. The object is something fixed, another substance that the subject-substance puts in front of itself. The object exists only insofar as there is a subject that puts it in front of itself. This means that the elementary linguistic sentence indicates the action, expressed by the verb, of the subject toward what is other than the subject, namely the object. The subject-object relation, transferred onto an ethical level, becomes that of intention-action, the sphere of being and the sphere of acting.

This means that the metaphysical distinction between a sphere of being and a sphere of acting (fundamental to the metaphysical concept of freedom) is fallacious, because it is based on the concept of substance which, far from being a given truth, is fallacious. The concept of substance indeed turns out to derive from language, which has been structured by humans.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 306.

As a consequence, substance is a concept invented by humans. It has no intrinsic or independent existence, as metaphysics claims.

5. The Critique of Memory and Consciousness

After *Human, All Too Human*, in later works such as *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche develops his assertion that the metaphysical concept of freedom is fallacious because it is grounded on that of substance. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche addresses this problem particularly in the second of its three essays, 'Guilt', 'bad conscience' and related matters. In this essay, Nietzsche especially focuses on the history of the concept of responsibility. Such a concept turns out to be grounded on the faculty of memory. According to historical custom, as informed by traditional metaphysical thought, people were considered responsible if they were able to remember their acts as a consequence of conscious decisions, where memory was regarded as a natural faculty innate within men. In opposition to this tradition, Nietzsche asserts that, far from being inborn, memory is a faculty artificially introduced in men by society.

Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*, as superficial people believe, but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word, to which we owe the fact that what we simply live through, experience, take in, no more enters our consciousness during digestion (one could call it spiritual ingestion) than does the thousand-fold process which takes place with our physical consumption of food, our so-called ingestion⁶.

Naturally, men are forgetful beings, most of their acts are unconscious. This forgetfulness does not represent a limit of human nature, it is just what is most natural in it. The true limit is instead consciousness, which is a faculty instilled in men by society. That forgetfulness characterizes men's intimate essence and that consciousness is something artificially attached to their nature is an assumption that Nietzsche discusses at length in *The Gay Science*, aphorism 354:

Man, like every living creature, is constantly thinking but does not know it; the thinking which becomes conscious is only the smallest part of it; let's say the shallowest, worst part – for only that conscious thinking *takes place in words, that is, in communication symbols*; and this fact discloses the origin of consciousness. In short, the development of language and the development of consciousness (*not* of reason but strictly of the way in which we become conscious of reason) go hand in hand. [...] My idea is clearly that consciousness actually belongs not to man's existence as an individual but rather to the community- and herd-aspects of his nature; that accordingly, it is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to community or herd; and that consequently each of us, even with the best will in the world to *understand* ourselves as individually as possible, to 'know ourselves', will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is 'non-individual', that which is 'average': that due to the nature of consciousness – to the 'genius of the species' governing it – our thoughts themselves are continually as it were *outvoted* and translated back into the herd perspective⁷.

6 F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. C. Diethe, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007, p. 35.

7 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 213.

Contrary to common sense expectations, Nietzsche asserts that men do not need consciousness to live: all of life would be possible without consciousness. However, in previous ages, this was not the case. At the dawn of civilization, being physically weaker than other animals, men could survive only by asking other people for help. The need to communicate their requests for help, so that others could understand their needs and accordingly provide assistance to them, led to their describing their problems, their conditions, and ultimately themselves, by means of a shared language. In other words, it was only if men were able to see themselves in the mirror, and to become conscious of themselves as individually as possible, that they were able to communicate their needs to others in order to receive help. To make themselves understood, men had to use a shared language, they had to describe themselves and their needs not with their own individual words and expressions, but with those of the shared language. The only way of becoming conscious of their needs was to translate them into the shared language, into the language of others. As soon as men used the shared language to describe their needs, they annihilated their personality at the same time, since by means of the shared language they could only describe common problems, not individual ones. Here is the origin of consciousness. It follows that consciousness does not represent men's intimate essence, as custom wants men to believe, but rather, it is the translation of men's intimate essence into something extremely alien to it: into the collective essence of others, of society.

Consciousness is also the seat of memory: it decides what men have to remember and what to forget. But since consciousness is the voice of society within ourselves, this means that memory is not an inborn faculty, but rather an artificial one. It is society that creates memory and it does so to take control of individuals. Memory is the necessary condition to be held responsible for one's deeds. According to society, only he who is able to remember his actions can be assigned responsibility. Hence, for society, the creation of memory is crucial in ascribing responsibility to individuals, which allows it to take control of them. Being responsible implies that one is able to make promises. Making promises in turn means making a deal with somebody else committing oneself to performing in the future the actions agreed upon at the moment of the promise. This means that, by making promises, one reveals one's future actions before having actually carried them out. As a result, men making promises turn out to be «calculable, regular, necessary»: their future behaviour is perfectly predictable, they have no secrets that society does not know about. Hence, it becomes clear why society creates memory. Insofar as society can predict people's behaviour, it *ipso facto* brings them under its control. Knowing in advance the actions that will be performed in the future, society can prevent actions which go against its interests from happening, and thus maintain the *status quo*. Therefore, memory proves to be the most powerful weapon in society's arsenal, equipping it to pursue its own interests at the expense of those of individuals.

That is precisely what constitutes the long history of the origins of responsibility. That particular task of breeding an animal with the prerogative to promise includes, as we have already understood, as precondition and preparation, the more immediate task of first making man to a certain degree necessary, uniform, a peer amongst peers, orderly and consequently predictable [...]. This man who is now free, who actually has the prerogative to promise, this master of the free will, this sovereign. [...] The proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom and

power over himself and his destiny, has penetrated him to his lowest depths and become an instinct, his dominant instinct: – what will he call his dominant instinct, assuming that he needs a word for it? No doubt about the answer: this sovereign human being calls it his conscience . . .⁸.

The man making promises is not a free man, since in promising he prevents himself from changing his mind and thus his behaviour. He condemns himself to always behave in the same way, as agreed in the promise. By condemning himself to always commit the same acts, he thereby makes of himself a fixed substance, preventing himself from freely developing his personality and mastering his own destiny. Indeed, for the man who makes promises, destiny has been determined once and for all by the promise, there is no possibility of acting differently. It turns out that society declares man free with the aim of actually putting his freedom in chains by making him responsible and thus capable of making promises. Far from making him free, the promise renders man's self substantial and thus easily predictable, thereby bringing him under society's control. Here it can be seen how Nietzsche, as in *Human, All Too Human*, criticizes the concept of freedom, as espoused by traditional metaphysical thought, and adopted by social custom, insofar as it leads to the substantialization of individuals, depriving them of the possibility of becoming masters of their own destiny.

6. The Critique of Guilt

In addition to being the basis of the concept of freedom established by custom, the promise is at the core of another concept that Nietzsche targets in his later writings, in *On the Genealogy of Morality* and in *Twilight of the Idols* respectively: that of guilt. As with the concept of the promise, likewise the concept of guilt is a weapon in society's arsenal, designed to prevent people from determining their own destiny by making their behaviour calculable. «Have these genealogists of morality up to now ever remotely dreamt that, for example, the main moral concept 'Schuld' ('guilt') descends from the very material concept of 'Schulden' ('debts')?»⁹ Far from being an exclusively moral concept, the concept of guilt has a primarily material origin: it originates in the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor. At the dawn of civilization, he who was not able to pay debts back was judged guilty indeed. Nietzsche comes to this conclusion due to the fact that, in German, guilt and debt are expressed with the same word: *Schuld*. At that time, not having money to pay debts back, debtors used to promise creditors that they would give them something still in their possessions as compensation, for instance their body, their wife, their freedom, or their life.

From the creditor's point of view, the favoured act of reparation was the right to exercise violence on the body of the debtor. Inflicting violence on the body of the debtor in fact represented an occasion for the creditor to demonstrate his power. This form of compensation was especially widespread in pre-Christian civilizations, where cruelty was considered the greatest joy.

By showing how, originally, there was nothing moral about guilt, Nietzsche aims to free men from their obsession with it. But it is in *Twilight of the Idols* that he expresses his strongest criticism of guilt.

⁸ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, cit., p. 37.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

In this work, Nietzsche illustrates how Christian morality uses the concept of guilt to make men unfree. Christian morality borrows from metaphysics the logical structure of its concept of freedom, that is, the division of man into the two spheres of being and acting. This structure implies that man, on the point of making decisions, is not influenced at all by the context in which he lives, as if he were outside of space and time. Drawing on this metaphysical structure, Christian morality considers a man free insofar as he does not act under constraint, but can take responsibility for his deeds. In turn, given that the individual can be assigned responsibility, in cases when the individual commits immoral acts, morality labels him as guilty. If the individual acted under constraint, this would mean that the individual did not act according to his free will and thus could not be assigned responsibility, which would ultimately mean that he could not be assigned guilt. For morality, only he who can take responsibility for his deeds can be assigned guilt. Once a man is considered guilty due to a single immoral deed, in the eyes of society this single deed has come to represent the whole behaviour of the individual, once and for all. It comes to represent the label that will be attached to him for the rest of his life. That is to say, it is enough that the individual commits an immoral deed just once, for him to be labelled for life as guilty, and thus to be marginalized from society once and for all. In considering him guilty forever, society deprives him of all possibility of changing his behaviour, of redeeming himself. In this way, society makes sure that the individual perceives guilt as his unchanging character, determined for all eternity, ultimately as his substance. Convinced that guilt constitutes his unchanging nature, and that he cannot do anything to change it, the labelled individual keeps behaving in the same way, i.e. repeating the guilty deeds. Thereby he renders his deeds calculable by society. As was the case with the concept of the promise, likewise guilt turns out to be a means used by society to take control of men.

The concept of ‘free will’: the shadiest trick theologians have up their sleeves for making humanity ‘responsible’ in their sense of the term, which is to say *dependent on them*. People were considered ‘free’ so that they could be judged and punished—so that they could be *guilty*: consequently, every act *had* to be thought of as willed, every act *had* to be seen as coming from consciousness¹⁰.

The only reason morality considers man free is to make him unfree. The conception of freedom, defined as the capacity to take responsibility for one’s deeds, turns out to be devised by theologians, granting them the power to judge men as guilty. It is the right to punish guilty behaviour that endows theologians with power within society, allowing them to stay at the top of the social pyramid.

Their power actually consists of punishing him who commits a guilty deed, by which is meant a behaviour contrary to the moral norms established by theologians themselves. Guilt is the most powerful tool for taking control of individuals which theologians possess. Since individuals perceive guiltiness as their substantial being, they become dependent upon theologians as administrators of punishment for immoral behaviours, and rewards for moral ones. As in his early work *Human, All Too Human*, and likewise in later works such as *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche attacks the metaphysical conception of freedom in order to target the concept of substance that lies at its root, a concept that prevents men from developing their character and thus becoming masters of their own destiny.

10 F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 181.