



WHAT COMES AFTER NIETZSCHE?

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Is the European Union a community of shared values? To pose such a question is to indicate a problem of cultural tension. This tension indeed exists. Yet, it should not be reduced only to the obvious spectrum of the discussed issues from the realm of bioethics (like abortion, euthanasia, embryo experiments), ethics (like homosexuality) or politics (like national independence in the UE, the role of religious beliefs in the public square or the limits of freedom of speech), because even the "narrative" asymmetry of the European institutions and the spiritual culture itself (I use the term "spiritual" or "spirit" in the broad sense of the German "*Geist*" or French "*esprit*") are indicative of the very problem.

While the institutions are generally under the hegemony of Enlightenment discourse (with all its ideas of freedom, equality, brotherhood, universal peace attained by the projective power of reason, tolerance etc.) or the so called "discourse of modernity", the contemporary spiritual – in the humanistic sense (philosophical, anthropological, etc.) – cultural condition is a kind of "discursive melting pot" marked by the effort of overcoming not only the Enlightenment or "modern" visions, but even post-modern conceptions as well.

In the search for the European Ethical community one should therefore take into consideration both dimensions of the problem – the "horizontal" one (tension within the debate) and the "vertical" one (inadequacy of institutions and *Zeitgeist*).

The vertical aspect shows the "instability of values", which is in some way the normal condition of the West, but it may also be identified as the "reversal of values", since institutions should be the fruit of the spiritual and political effort of the community, and not only an artificial "legislative" act. Both symptoms are signs of the European identity problem, and since identity in the deepest sense is an ontological question, I will attempt to present an ontological analysis of the problem.

The horizontal tension, generally speaking, is determined by the polarization between the so called "conservative" and "progressive" options, or, in another paradigm, between "rightist" and "leftist" discourses. Since both points of view appeared after the French Revolution, they are intrinsically reactive and in this sense "negative" perspectives.

The progressive approach reacts against the values of the traditional society, which it regards as the source of oppression, blaming it for the lack of universal freedom. The conservative approach, which stands for traditional values, reacts against revolution.

To solve this tension one should seek for a "positive" perspective, which is not merely reactive but makes it possible to judge and thus to reconcile the "old" with the "new." The theoretical condition is here to stand "beyond – or rather – on the other side of good and evil" defined by both opposite discourses, and to look for the deeper cause of this tension (perhaps you can hear now the echo of the Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Beyond Good and Evil*).

The vertical tension is more problematic, because there is always some interrelationship between institutions which are the "visible" and "tangible" points of reference for the community and the "invisible" spirit of the community. The principle I mentioned above is a classical one and presupposes the substantial unity of "spirit" and "body" in the community: it was the genius of the Roman spirit which "invented" the institution but for the Romans "*imperium*" meant "power" as the principle of the rule, not the "(visible) territory" or the "state" (the Greek custom was similar: the "city" meant always people, *ἡ τῶν Αθηναίων πολὺς*...).

The modern custom is a kind of artificial transposition – the institution is no longer the power of the community but is imposed on the community; *Leviathan* takes the place of the community spirit, but it is connected with it in an artificial way, so the body is artificial. The "state" indicates now a "place" or "institutions", rather than the community itself. I call this the "reversal of values", because values are no longer the expression of the community's vitality; on the contrary – the community is objected to the (indispensable according to Hobbes) prior value of Leviathan.

The problem of the vitality of values, as well as the tension between progress and decline were the main aspects of the philosophy of Nietzsche expressed in his *Umwertung aller Werte* – "transmutation or transvaluation of all values" program. Because of the ambiguous reception of his thought, some things must be pointed out by way of introduction. Nietzsche viewed the transvaluation of values as the high point of his philosophical mission.

After having given "mankind the most profound book it possesses", as he described with characteristic charm his work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche was preparing "the most independent" one, revealing the final transvaluation which was meant as the act of the "most sublime auto reflection of humanity" ultimately establishing the principle of the "will to power". In fact, he managed only to announce it in *Twilight of the Idols* which was the last work published before his collapse into madness in January 1889 (works published later, including *The will to power*, containing the most systematic approach were mostly edited by his sister and thus are not genuine).

What were the idols whose fall Nietzsche proclaimed? The idols are the false gods, simulacra. They are made by men in the act of resentment against the Dionysian vitality of pure life. Failing to achieve this human – “all too human” – plenitude, man seeks an idol whom he could serve for the price of anti-vital security to deaden the “sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life”.

The process of inventing the idols, e.g. the resentful negation of life, is the essence of the decadence of culture. The decline started already at the beginning of the Western world, in Greece, and Socrates himself was actually the first *décadent*. Belonging to the lowest class, the ugly Socrates, the archetype of a criminal – *monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo* – had to feel rejection since, as Nietzsche puts it, “ugliness, in itself an objection, is among the Greeks almost a refutation.” That internal monster made him deny “all the instincts of the earlier Greeks” and “transvestite” his contempt for life into the idea of virtue which equates reason with happiness.

Thus dialectic is invented, which reverses the value of exploding vitality into immovable, therefore “dead” abstraction. Socrates is thus the first “revolutionist expressing plebeian resentment” who “as one oppressed, enjoys his own ferocity in the knife-thrusts of his syllogisms”. The crucial point of the argument is the tension between the constantly changeable flow of pure terrestrial life and unchangeable and immovable ideas “from another world” which poison the vitality of the instincts.

The platonic dualism is the soil which bears further idols, especially Christianity – as Nietzsche puts it in *Anti-Christ* – “the great curse”, which by establishing the cult of charity praises the weak for whom it promises eternal life “somewhere else”. Nietzsche interprets the whole history of the West as the march of idols (in 20th cent. cf. [Jean Baudrillard](#)’s “precision of simulacra”...).

The principal conclusion is that the idols fight one another, so each idol is the negation of another idol. Thus, since every idol is the negation of life, the decadence is the process of the negation of negation which appears as the burning out of “sense” on the historical horizon (in this context Nietzsche uses the term “nihilism”).

Virtue, God, History, Progress, Society, Democracy...these all are the idols which gradually weaken all vital powers of humanity. This weakness is the cause of the decline of politics. Nietzsche claims that:

Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: later on, there are no worse and no

more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions. Their effects are known well enough: they undermine the will to power; they level mountain and valley, and call that morality; they make men small, cowardly, and hedonistic--every time it is the herd animal that triumphs with them. Liberalism: in other words, herd-animalization.

Our institutions are no good any more: on that there is universal agreement - However, it is not their fault but ours. Once we have lost all the instincts out of which institutions grow, we lose institutions altogether because we are no longer good for them. Democracy has ever been the form of decline in organizing power (...) [it is] the form of decline of the state. In order that there may be institutions, there must be a kind of will, instinct, or imperative, which is anti-liberal to the point of malice: the will to tradition, to authority, to responsibility for centuries to come, to the solidarity of chains of generations, forward and backward ad infinitum.

When this will is present, something like the imperium Romanum is founded (...) The whole of the West no longer possesses the instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which a future grows: perhaps nothing antagonizes its "modern spirit" so much.

One lives for the day, one lives very fast, one lives very irresponsibly: precisely this is called "freedom." That which makes an institution an institution is despised, hated, repudiated: one fears the danger of a new slavery the moment the word "authority" is even spoken out loud. That is how far decadence has advanced in the value-instincts of our politicians, of our political parties: instinctively they prefer what disintegrates, what hastens the end.

Despite his ferocious language, Nietzsche was not a pessimist. You may find numerous quotes where he denounces the weakness of pessimism, for example that of Schopenhauer. He deeply believed that decadence may be overcome definitely with the project of transvaluation, that is elevating mankind up to the *Übermensch*, a super-human level of the Overman. Hence it may be said that he was both hyper-conservative and hyper-progressive.

He shared intrinsically conservative nostalgia after the "Golden Age" – the age of Dionysus, and simultaneously hoped with progressives for the evolutionary metamorphosis of man which would provide him a terrestrial salvation. Nietzsche however did not want to be merely anti-platonic, because it would be only reactive, and as such – decadent.

The problem is that one cannot get rid of dialectic without dialectic and since the existential cannot be conceptualized, as noted a commentator, "the world of the perfect immanence of life, beyond good and evil, falsehood and lie, beyond distinctions and antitheses that yield negations, defies expression in any language governed by the game of oppositions; at the most it can be the Unutterable, nostalgically exhorted and invoked in its poetic, dithyrambic outpourings", the only way to cross the boundaries of language is the mystical apophasis...

But still – apophatic discourse is via negativa and Nietzsche wanted to express pure positiveness of life. In fact, he has never attained this goal, the book on transvaluation has never been written. Instead of apophasis Nietzsche left us with his tacit aphasia of madness. Of course interpreters argue whether we are supposed to take this tragic finale of his philosophy into account, but one thing we can note for sure: Nietzsche failed to overcome the decadence which he opposed.

What was the reason of this failure? After defeating all the idols Nietzsche was left to overcome the last idol, Man himself, whose deplorable condition was the permanent source of all the other idols. Indeed, being extremely consistent (and let us add – the only consistent Nietzscheanist was Nietzsche himself) he knew it was the *conditio sine qua non*: this is the program of Zarathustra.

In fact, Nietzsche wanted to divinize man (note that his language is purely religious: the ideals of Dionysus and Zarathustra, however mythological, send us back to the divine) in reaching the perfect and self-sufficient plenitude of boundless will to power. Thus Nietzsche became a reversed mystic who instead of uniting himself with the Absolute God, collapses into himself, the absolute-transvestite... (*les extrêmes se touchent*, as the French say, and nihilism and mysticism are very close to each other).

Moreover, taking up his philosophy structurally one must admit that no matter how Nietzsche tried to overcome German idealism in its peak of Hegelianism, he intrinsically rested a Hegelian, Hegelian à rebours but still Hegelian. For Nietzsche the only possible absolute was the absolute of culture – this is the realm of his analysis, and in that way he was bound by his own Zeitgeist.

And let us ask more – what became of Nietzsche? 100 years after *Twilight of the Idols* was published one of the main Nietzschean topics was again to be contemplated. The idea which organized Milan Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* was the idea of the Eternal Return. For Nietzsche, the discovery of this metaphysical law was *la gaya scienza*, the *Gay Science*, which was a call for heroic fight for pure life in its every moment.

Kundera's perspective is quite different – such heroism is absurd, and the very idea of eternity in any form appeared to him as unbearable gravity. We have one life which is the sum of volatile moments. *Einmal ist keinmal*, "what happens but once, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all," [Kundera says](#), transmuting Nietzschean heroism into nihilism.

Thus, in the language of Nietzsche, Kundera, a *décadent* of Nietzscheanism, only confirms the failure of the German Philosopher. But Kundera himself elaborated a language which explains that status quo.

In the part entitled [The Grand March](#), Kundera expresses what can be called the ontology of Kitsch: *"Kitsch is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. So, in other words: Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being. But what is the basis of being? God? Mankind? Struggle? Love? Man? Woman? Since opinions vary, there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international."*

For Kundera "categorical agreement with being" means the denial of any inconvenience and imperfectness of life which are the source of the grand march of kitsch under many forms. And that is quite similar to the Nietzschean march of idols. One may notice that while Nietzsche diagnosed the decadence of the 19th century existentially, Kundera summed up the decadence of the 20th century, with its totalitarianism, moral revolutions and existential fatigue, in an aesthetical way.

The topic which links the motive of unbearable lightness and kitsch is the question of vanishing and oblivion. Kundera sums up the part about the grand march as follows:

"What remains of the dying population of Cambodia? One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms. What remains of Tomas? An inscription reading HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH. What remains of Beethoven? A frown, an improbable mane, and a somber voice intoning Es muss sein! What remains of Franz? An inscription reading A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS. And so on and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion."

Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion. Words cannot express the whole gravity and lightness of each life. What remains is always in some way a falsification of the existence. To that little litany above we may add the question: And what remains of the Nietzschean struggle to overcome European decadence? Let [Emil Cioran](#), a great 20th century décadent, answer:

Nietzsche makes me tired. Sometimes my tiredness verges on disgust. One cannot accept a thinker whose ideal is the opposite of himself. There is something repulsive about a weakling who preaches physical strength, who is a ruthless weakling. It is all good for teenagers. (...) The success of Nietzsche is largely due to the fact that he advocated theories he never adhered to. We are fond of a weakling or a regular guest to boarding houses for spinsters who raves about power, egoism, and an unscrupulous hero. If he had been the hero he extols in his texts, we would not be intrigued by him any more.

Not to mention what remains of the idea of Übermensch not only after Nazism but also after Hollywood – note that merciful English editors change the original translation “Superman” by a more sophisticated “Overman” just to avoid the grotesque connotation with the flying guy in the red stockinet panties.

And what remains of Kundera, we should ask at last, the one who denounced the “totalitarian kitsch” of Communism? Well, the answer is: evidence (whether actual or alleged) of his cooperation with the communist regime secret service...

Thus both Nietzsche and Kundera are defeated by their own principles. And yet, does their failure invalidate their diagnoses? Not at all. If we put aside Nietzschean axiology (which results from his reductive materialistic premises) we will discover a great physiologist of the spirit (as Hegel was a great phenomenologist of the spirit). If we put aside Kundera's nihilism (which itself results from the burning out of the “metaphysical instinct”), we will discover an accurate description of collective memory's mechanisms.

The lesson of Nietzsche (and of Kundera as well) is in fact the great lesson of existential hermeneutics. What we call “values” by the nature of our language and cognitive skills have intrinsic possibility to turn into heartless idols, purely formal abstracts, kitsch-narrations, which are no longer compatible with life.

On the other hand, the institutions which were genetically invented to preserve values and make them universal have the intrinsic possibility to turn against the community itself when it no longer has any

vital instincts to establish sound institutions. Furthermore, a community which loses its vitality may reject true values, because of its incapability to live them.

The permanent transvaluation of values is the fact in the history of our culture, but only the understanding of its real causes may let us regain the substantial unity of its "spirit" and "body" and make us again the subjects, not objects of our institutions. So the effort to re-evaluate values rests in the community's hermeneutic and existential work.

Surprisingly there is probably only one voice in contemporary culture which takes up this task. This is the voice of Pope Benedict XVI, who unceasingly urges the interpretation of European history as a whole without reducing it to particular narrative traditions. He mentioned this idea a few days ago here in Prague, as he had before in Paris, La Sapienza or Regensburg.

In fact, the main topic of Benedict XVI's pontificate was the problem of the so called "hermeneutic of continuity", which he expressed in his manifesto to the Roman Curia (note that the Catholic Church is struggling with the same illness as European culture – the identity crisis). Generally, its goal is to discover in history what he calls, after the Greeks, Logos – transcending reason which alone gives the perspective to judge unnecessary cultural changes and discern them from real values.

So, is the re-evaluation of all values still possible? Yes, it is, provided that we rediscover the unity of life and values which was the foundation of Western culture. Thus, our task is undertaking the effort of establishing existential hermeneutics. And, after all, if there is not any Logos transcending this History, if the unity of values and life is not to be achieved – we are, Ladies and Gentlemen, only the "transvestited" "opinion makers" who participate in some Grand March of kitsch, among the other Nietzschean "Last Men" described in Zarathustra.

[This article](#) appears courtesy of [Christianitas](#).

The [image](#) shows, "Šaulys (Sagittarius)," by Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, painted in 1907.

