
NIETZSCHE AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

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Poststructuralist thinkers tend to emphasise Nietzsche's critical relationship to science, as a result of their scepticism towards scientific discourse in general. Their interpretation of Nietzsche in this regard is justified, in that much of Nietzsche's work is aimed at exposing scientific objectivity as an illusion. In addition to this, Nietzsche takes a consistently derogatory view of Darwin throughout his work. Yet, some thinkers maintain that Nietzsche's relation to science in general, and to Darwin in particular is far more complex than this.

In his book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Daniel Dennett argues that Nietzsche's account of the genealogy of morals is consistent with evolutionary theory. He calls Nietzsche the 'second great sociobiologist', after Hobbes. According to Dennett, Nietzsche believed morality evolved out of the pre-moral world of human life, because of the benefits it brought the species. In other words, Dennett maintains that, according to Nietzsche, the instinct for morality evolved in the context of exchange.

In this paper, I examine Nietzsche's relationship to evolutionary theory in detail. I also analyse the plausibility of Dennett's views regarding this relationship, and whether Dennett's claim that evolutionarily oriented philosophers and psychologists have much to learn from Nietzsche is warranted.

Introduction

Can we call Nietzsche a Darwinist? This seems to be an absurd question, because one tends to view Nietzsche's relationship to science in general, and to Darwin in particular, from the point of view of poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida, who place a strong emphasis on Nietzsche's critical relationship to science. Indeed, when one examines the Nietzschean texts, the almost overwhelmingly negative view that Nietzsche has towards the pretensions of science is noticeable. In addition, Nietzsche's view of Darwin remains consistently derogatory throughout his work. In *Ecce Homo*, for example, Nietzsche was sufficiently irritated by those who insisted on reading his work – and in particular his

proclamation of the *Übermensch* - in Darwinian terms, to complain: '...learned cattle caused me on its account to be suspected of Darwinism' (*Ecce Homo*, p.72)¹. It is typical of the misreadings that have plagued the reception of Nietzsche's thought that he has been so frequently identified with one of the very nineteenth century figures whose theory of evolution he repeatedly sought to challenge and whom he dismissed as an intellectual mediocrity.

The poststructuralist view of Nietzsche's relationship to science is one with much merit, since Nietzsche did aim at exposing scientific objectivity as an illusion throughout his work. Yet, Daniel Dennett, in his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, claims that Nietzsche's relationship to science in general, and to Darwinism in particular, is more complex than what first meets the eye. Dennett believes that, on further examination, it can be deduced from the Nietzschean texts that Nietzsche believed in the 'evolution' of morality from a pre-moral world of human life, and also that the instinct for morality evolved in the context of exchange.

This paper is structured in such a way as to examine whether Dennett's claims are warranted. I begin with a discussion of Dennett's ideas on Nietzsche's relationship to Darwinism, followed by a brief exposition on Darwinism and evolutionary theory, as it appeared in Nietzsche's time, and as it appears today. I then proceed to examine Nietzsche's philosophy, concentrating specifically on his ethical theory, in order to decide whether Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen as consistent with evolutionary theory, as Dennett claims.

Who is Daniel Dennett?

The philosopher Daniel C. Dennett is interested in consciousness, and his view of it, similar to that of Minsky's, is as high-level, abstract thinking. He is known as the most important proponent of the computational model of the mind and he has clashed with philosophers such as John Searle, who maintain that the most important aspects of consciousness are intentionality and subjective quality and can never be computed. He is the philosopher of choice of the AI community.

The author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster, 1995) is Distinguished Arts and Sciences Professor, Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the Centre for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. He was born in Boston in 1942, the son of a historian by the same name, and received his B.A. in philosophy from Harvard in 1963. He then went to Oxford to work with Gilbert Ryle, under

whose supervision he completed the D.Phil. in philosophy in 1965. He taught at U.C. Irvine from 1965 to 1971, when he moved to Tufts, where he has taught ever since, aside from periods visiting at Harvard, Pittsburgh, Oxford, and the Ecole Normal Superieur in Paris.

In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett places himself squarely in the ultra-Darwinist camp of George C. Williams and Richard Dawkins, launching a serious critique of the scientific ideas of Stephen Jay Gould.

What is 'Darwin's Dangerous Idea'? (3)

According to Dennett, 'Darwin's Dangerous Idea' is encapsulated in the following statement by Darwin:

If during the long course of ages and under varying conditions of life, organic beings vary at all in the several parts of their organisation, and I think that this cannot be disputed; if there be, owing to the high geometric powers of increase of each species, at some age, season, or year, a severe struggle for life, and this certainly cannot be disputed; then, considering the infinite diversity in structure, constitution, and habits, to be advantageous to them, I think it would be a most extraordinary fact if no variation ever had occurred useful to each being's own welfare, in the same way as so many variations have occurred useful to man. But if variations useful to any organic being do occur, assuredly individuals thus characterised will have the best chance of being preserved in the struggle for life, and from the strong principle of inheritance they will tend to produce offspring similarly characterised. This principle of preservation, I have called, for the sake of brevity, Natural Selection (Darwin, p.40).

In other words, according to Dennett, Darwin's 'dangerous idea' is the idea of Natural Selection. This idea was the result of several earlier ideas. Chief of these was an insight Darwin gained from reflection on the 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* by Thomas Malthus. In this essay, Malthus asserted that population explosion and famine are inevitable, and it is generally accepted that Darwin thought that he could use these ideas on the 'struggle for existence' as the driving force behind natural selection. Recent research by the philosopher of biology, Ruse (1993) has however shown that Darwin did not get his ideas on the 'struggle for

existence' from Malthus' social views on man. According to Ruse (1993, 20), Darwin actually encountered the idea of the struggle for existence long before he read Malthus – he actually first encountered it in Lyell's *Principles of Geology*.

Dennett continues in his book to reassert the importance of Darwin's ideas on evolution, and to show that although evolutionary theory has been supplemented by a number of new findings, the theory itself has not yet been falsified.

Evolutionary Theory – Yesterday and Today

Before one can understand the relation of Nietzsche's philosophy to Darwin and his theory, one must first explore exactly what this theory is and means. With evolutionary biology riddled with confusions and controversies during the period between the publication of *The Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* and the present time, Darwinism itself is a problematic concept within the context of the nineteenth century, as well as today. In the nineteenth century, Darwinism could have meant transmutation of species, descent from a common ancestor, or natural selection, depending on whom one was speaking to. It was in Germany that these differing attitudes were most visible, where a significant number of biologists wholly rejected Darwin's theory of natural selection, or attached very little importance to it. In its place, most theorists supported a pre-Darwinian commitment to non-adaptive models of evolutionary change. I believe that these same attitudes underpin Nietzsche's own evolutionism, and in particular, his anti-Darwinian statements. I will return to this point later.

Even today, as Dennett notes, most people have only a vague understanding of evolutionary theory, beset with popular misconceptions. In fact, he quotes a Gallup Poll of 1993 which discovered that 47 percent of adult Americans believe that *Homo Sapiens* is a species created by God less than ten thousand years ago (Dennett, 1995:263).

It is also interesting to note that the prevailing attitudes towards the theory of evolution, especially with regards to human evolution, have been shaped by the sentiments of the time, for example, in the 1940's, when the world was in the thrall of technology, the 'Man the Toolmaker' hypothesis' was popular, while in the 1970's with feminism being all the rage, people rather spoke of 'Woman the Gatherer' (Leakey, 1997:14) Thus, I have felt it necessary to include a very brief exposition on evolutionary theory,

in order to investigate Dennett's claims about its relation to Nietzsche's philosophy more precisely.

Evolution comes from the Latin verb *evolere*, which means to roll out, to unroll, to roll open and to disentangle. The basic thesis of Darwin's work is that organisms have developed from preceding organisms and species. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) is considered to be the founder of modern evolutionary theory, but he was not the first to come up with the basic idea of evolution. The credit for this must go to the Greek philosophers Thales, Anaximander and Aristotle in particular. I will not discuss these philosophers' ideas, except to note that Darwin was well acquainted with these ancient ideas. Darwin's contribution was to develop these ideas into a scientific theory, and explicate the concept of natural selection.

Before Darwin, the prevailing theory, which claimed to explain biological and geological phenomena, was known as the Platonic theory. According to this theory, every species has an inherent, unchangeable, static essence or principle that determines biological growth. This concept was derived from Plato's theory of unchangeable Ideas. The theory did, however, allow for a small amount of modification/development, but then it was only for slight modifications within a particular species.

Charles Darwin was born in Shrewsbury, Shropshire. He was the son of Robert Waring Darwin and his wife Susannah; and the grandson of the scientist Erasmus Darwin, and of the potter Josiah Wedgwood. His mother died when he was eight years old and his sister raised him. He was taught the classics at Shrewsbury, and then sent to Edinburgh to study medicine, which he hated. A final attempt at educating him was made by sending him to Christ's College, Cambridge, to study theology. During that period, he enjoyed collecting plants, insects and geological specimens, guided by his cousin William Darwin Fox, an entomologist.

Darwin's scientific inclinations were encouraged by his professor, John Stevens Henslow, who was instrumental in securing Darwin's place on the surveying expedition of the HMS Beagle to Patagonia, which lasted from 1831-1836. This five-year journey enabled Darwin to publish several works on the geological and zoological discoveries during the journey- works that placed him at the forefront in the field of science. Darwin condensed his vast mass of notes into his great work *The Origin of Species by means of Natural selection*, which was published in 1859. This important work, received throughout Europe with deep interest, was violently

attacked because it did not agree with the account of creation given in the Book of Genesis.

Darwin noted that offspring differ physically from their parents in significant ways. Those changes, which he termed variations, are today known as mutations. Darwin assumed that the new traits best suited to the circumstances in which a species finds itself are most likely to appear again in the next generation. The most successful variations will be transmitted from generation to generation, until the species gradually evolves, through the process of natural selection, into a somewhat different species. This is the way that humans evolved out of earlier hominid forms. All species have evolved and adapted themselves to their changing environments, according to natural selection.

Clearly, the process of natural selection does not entail a fierce struggle for existence among members of the same species. According to Novák,

Darwin comprehended the action of the struggle for life as the cause of natural selection perfectly and completely, although he did not always interpret it clearly and in just the same way. As a result, most of his successors failed to understand this complex abstract law properly and confused it, and often still confuse, quite wrongly, with intra-specific fight, i.e. with injurious antagonism between individuals of the same species. This was due largely to the first German translation of Darwin's book, in which 'struggle for life' was rendered unexactly as 'Kampf ums Dasein' (Fight for existence) (1975:49).

Thus, Darwin's natural selection is only a 'struggle for existence' in the sense that every organism strives to maintain itself. In fact, in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin shows that in many species, the struggle between individuals for the means of existence and is replaced by co-operation. Throughout this book, Darwin emphasises the fundamental role of interdependence and mutual aid in the adaptation and survival of the species.

If man had descended from an animal possessing great size, strength and ferocity, it is unlikely that man would have acquired his pronounced social qualities. Darwin writes:

It might have been an immense advantage to man to have sprung from some comparatively weak creature. The slight corporeal strength of man, his little speed, his want of natural weapons, etc., are more than counterbalanced,

firstly by his intellectual powers, through which he has, whilst still remaining in a barbarous state, formed for himself weapons, tools, etc., and secondly by his social qualities which lead him to give aid to his fellow-men and receive it in return (Zeitlin, 1994:129).

Darwin's studies of animals and humans therefore leave no doubt that interdependence, co-operation and mutual sympathy are essential if the species in question is to thrive and flourish. Nietzsche, however, imagined that in the 'struggle for survival' the outcome is actually the reverse of the school of Darwin. For Nietzsche, Darwin's theory implied

...the disadvantage of the strong, the privileged, and the happy exceptions. Species do not evolve towards perfection: the weak always prevail over the strong – simply because they are the great majority (*Twilight of the Idols*, section 14, p.71).

This conception flies in the face of the best scientific evidence in both Darwin's work and in post-Darwinian animal research. There is no weakening of the group nor any separation or antagonism between the stronger type and the herd, for the emergence of the stronger or victor benefits the herd by providing leadership that heightens the effectiveness of the co-operative organisation of the entire group.

Evolutionary Theory Today: The Genetic Revolution

There have been many revolutionary shifts in evolutionary theory since Darwin's time, but the theory has not yet been refuted. The most interesting thing about Darwin's theory was the fact that he had no concept of a gene. Today, we live in the time of the genetic revolution where the idea of genetic manipulation of species has become almost commonplace. So what is genetic engineering then? Genetic engineering can be defined as procedures that allow the experimental alteration of genetic information. Genetic information is information contained in the structure of molecules, that is passed on from mother cell to daughter cells at cell division, and from parents to offspring.

The first person to attempt to explain why children are like their parents was Hippocrates (Russo and Cove, 1998:134). He believed that semen somehow contained the properties of the body from which it came. Aristotle argued that this could not be possible,

because often children of crippled or deformed parents did not inherit these characteristics. Instead, Aristotle put forward a very modern idea: that semen contained information and 'instructed' a mother how to make a child. This idea was forgotten by the generations that followed.

The first true experiments, which led to the laws of inheritance, were performed by the Augustinian monk, Gregor Mendel, who published his theory in 1865. Mendel's work lay in 120 libraries throughout the world for 35 years, without anyone appreciating its significance. It was not until 1900 that three different people discovered Mendel's Laws independently: de Vries, Correns and Tschermak. Soon after, British scientist William Bateson suggested that the study of heredity deserved its own name and proposed 'genetics' (from the Greek *gen* = born, produced.)

On February 28, 1953, Francis Crick walked into the Eagle pub in Cambridge, England, and as James Watson later recalled, announced that 'we had found the secret of life' (Time, March 29, 1999:100). Watson and Crick had in fact done just this - they had determined the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA. That structure, a double helix that can unzip to make copies of itself, confirmed suspicions that DNA carries an organism's hereditary information.

Studies of genetics flourished from then onwards. By the end of the 1960's, the way in which DNA coded for genetic information and was used to build proteins was well established. The interest of the medical world in genetics has been increasing rapidly and today, we stand at the threshold of what may be called the genetic revolution. With the advent of genetics, Darwin's theory has been enriched, because the 'carrier' of information that is passed along in the process of evolution has been identified.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche belongs among those very few thinkers whose standing as modern masters is undoubted. Yet, because of Nietzsche's complex, aphoristic style of writing, misconceptions and misreadings of his work abound. According to Stambaugh:

Everyone seems to have his or her own Nietzsche. There are various versions of Nietzsche belonging to literary criticism and also to musicologists. There is the Nietzsche distortion perpetrated by the Nazis. There was a lot of pre-Kaufmann nonsense about the Nietzsche who was mad from the outset and produced nothing but the ravings of a

madman. More recently and more philosophically, the two main continental interpretations have been expressed by the French, neo-Freudian, and Derridean line, and the German, Heideggerian line that sees in Nietzsche the completion of the history of metaphysics (Stambaugh, 1994:135).

Nietzsche vs. Darwin

According to Zeitlin (1994), Nietzsche accepted the fundamentals of the Darwinian thesis that humanity had evolved from earlier animal forms in a purely naturalistic manner, through chance and accident. After Darwin, the need for a conscious creative principle, force or being seemed unnecessary, since what had formerly appeared as order could now be explained as random change. Hence, for Nietzsche, natural selection was a process free of metaphysical explanation. Nietzsche's view of the world as chaotic was reinforced by his ideas on Darwin. The Darwinian theory complemented a view of reality, which Nietzsche had:

The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos - in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of an lack of order, arrangement (*Gliederung*), form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms ... Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses' (The Gay Science, Aphorism 109:168).

This view is in agreement with Dennett's views, which I will discuss later. However, we can now ask, why is Nietzsche's attitude to Darwinism consistently hostile? Why does he call it 'true but lethal' [Thoughts out of Season II, section 9]?

Anti-Darwin. What surprises me most when I survey the great destinies of man is that I always see before me the opposite of what Darwin and his school see or want to see today: that is, selection working in favour of the stronger, better-constituted, and the progress of the species. The opposite is palpably the case: happy accidents are eliminated, the more evolved types lead nowhere, it is the average and below average types which ineluctably ascend to power...That will to power in which I recognise the ultimate basis and character of all change furnishes us

with the explanation of why selection does not operate in favour of exceptional and fortunate cases: the strongest and the most fortunate are weak when they are opposed by the organised instinct of the herd, the timidity of the weak, the great number. My total picture of the world of values shows that in the highest values which rule mankind today, it is not the happy accidents, the selected types, who have the upper hand; on the contrary, it is the types in whom decadence is rife-perhaps there is nothing so interesting in the world as this unwelcome spectacle...[WP section 685].

According to Stern (1985), survival, duration, numbers, biological usefulness-these are the enemies of Nietzsche's vision. The only value that matters is excellence issuing from catastrophe and deprivation, and proved in solitude and singularity, in the exception. Apart from that consistent emphasis on conflict, the 'life' that Nietzsche extols has nothing in common with the life his Victorian contemporary attempted to explain, by giving Biology the intelligence of a purposeful God (Stern, 1985:75).

Nietzsche vs. the Social Darwinists

Nietzsche's attitude towards Darwin is very complex, and so, his attitudes towards evolution must be seen not merely in relation to Darwin himself, but also in relation to the whole complex of nineteenth century evolutionary theory, which represents, on the whole, a misrepresentation of the theory of natural selection. According to Dennett,

Nietzsche's references to Darwin reveal that his acquaintance with Darwin's ideas was best with common misrepresentations and misunderstandings, so perhaps he 'knew' Darwin primarily through the enthusiastic appropriations of the many popularisers in Germany, and indeed, throughout Europe (Dennett, 1995:182).

Nineteenth century Darwinists, like Herbert Spencer and David Strauss, tried to reconcile the theory of natural selection with a basically Christian, and in Strauss' case, Hegelian, theory of providence. These thinkers believed that evolution would lead humanity to a utopian state of moral perfection. Spencer, for example, believed that the industrial type of society would lead to an increasing relaxation of social hierarchies, increased freedom and a non-coercive government. The relations between individuals would

be characterised by perfect co-operation. This advocacy of an unrealistic ethics of altruism by contemporary Darwinists led Nietzsche to dismiss Darwinism as a decadent morality of the herd.

Nietzsche's contempt for the 'English type' of genealogy was directed against the Social Darwinists, particularly Herbert Spencer, as well as Darwin's fans on the continent. One of these fans was Nietzsche's friend, Paul Rée, whose book *Origin of the Moral Sensations* (1877) provoked Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. He says:

The first impulse to publish something of my hypotheses concerning the origin of morality was given me by a clear, tidy, and shrewd-also precocious-little book in which I encountered distinctly for the first time an upside-down and perverse species of genealogical hypothesis, the genuinely English type, that attracted me-with that power of attraction which everything contrary, everything antipodal possesses. [1887, preface]

Spencer proclaimed that the survival of the fittest is not just Mother Nature's Way, but ought to be our way. According to the Social Darwinists, it was 'natural' for the strong to vanquish the weak, and for the rich to exploit the poor. Among the Social Darwinist's ideas was a political agenda: efforts by do-gooders to provide nurture for the least fortunate members of society are counterproductive; such efforts permit those to replicate whom nature would wisely cull. These ideas were not the main target of Nietzsche's criticism. His main target was the historical naïveté of the Social Darwinists (Hoy, 1986, 462), their Panglossian optimism about the ready adaptability of human reason (or Prudence) to morality.

Nietzsche's Ethics

Nietzsche's main interest lay in the realm of morals. Like Kierkegaard, he was interested mainly in how to live. According to Solomon:

Thus Nietzsche is quite original in elevating the instincts to an exalted philosophical status. Indeed, he even suggests that reason is no more than 'a system of relations between various passions and desires'. He calls himself a 'naturalist' and is, perhaps, more of a biologist in temperament than any other philosopher since Aristotle (1995:118).

In other words, Nietzsche tells us that the instincts move us, and make us creative, wise, or stupid. The business of philosophy, morality and reason is not to deny the instincts, but to discriminate among them, encourage those that are 'life-enhancing' and resist those that are 'life-stultifying'. Anticipating Freud's notion of sublimation, Nietzsche argues that morals and the pursuit of the good life are to be based on the instincts and not on the principles of practical reason.

Dennett calls Nietzsche the 'second great sociobiologist', after Hobbes (Dennett, 1995, 461). His justification for this statement is that Nietzsche's ethics are naturalistic: instead of founding ethics in a supernatural sphere as Kant, for example, does, Nietzsche believes that morality evolved out of the state of nature because of the benefits it brought to the species. According to Dennett, Nietzsche began, as Hobbes had done, by imagining a pre-moral world of human life, but he divided his story of the development of morality into two phases. In the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche explores the first phase. He asks '...to breed an animal with the right to make promises...is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is it not the real problem regarding man?' (1967, Second Essay, sec 1, p.57)

Just as evolutionary psychologists would, Nietzsche asked under which circumstances an instinct for morality would have evolved. His answer, according to Dennett, is that morality evolved in the context of exchange. A debtor would promise to pay a creditor in order to attain a benefit: 'to inspire trust in his promise to repay, to provide a guarantee of the seriousness and sanctity of his promise, to impress repayment as a duty, an obligation upon his own conscience, the debtor made a contract with the creditor and pledged that if he should fail to repay he would substitute something that he 'possessed', something that he had control over; for example, his body, his wife, his freedom, or even his life...Above all, however, the creditor could inflict every kind of indignity and torture on the body of the debtor; for example, cut from it as much as seemed commensurate with the size of the debt' (1967, Section 5, 64).

In this context, debtors who keep their promises and thus did not incur the punishment of creditors would be at a selective disadvantage over those who did not. As Dennett says: 'Nietzsche's suggestion is that eventually...our ancestors 'bred' an animal with

an innate capacity to keep a promise, and a concomitant talent for detecting and punishing a promise breaker (1995:463).

Pursuing the origin of guilt in the buyer-seller, creditor-debtor relationship, Nietzsche offers us a variation on the old theme of the 'social contract'. What happens when an individual offends against his community? Converging with the sociological theory of Emile Durkheim, Nietzsche underscores that such an individual is above **all a breaker** of his contract with the community as a whole from whom he derived protection, benefits and comforts. The offender is a debtor who has not only failed to pay his debts to society, but also actually attacked the creditor, thereby inflicting a wound on the body politic. The community-creditor heals its wounds by depriving the offender of all the benefits and advantages that it had previously bestowed on him, thus reaffirming its integrity.

This first stage permitted the formation of early societies, according to Nietzsche, but there was still no morality in the sense we recognise it today. The second phase occurred in historical times, according to Nietzsche, and can be traced via etymological reconstruction and a proper reading of the texts of the last two millennia.

Nietzsche goes about explaining morality by examining the history of morals in a particular society or group of societies, showing how the current attitudes developed through time. He calls this a 'genealogy of morals'.

According to Nietzsche, what we call morality in the ancient world originated among the slave population of the Hebrews, and developed during the long periods of martyrdom of the early Christians. It was, in other words, a 'slave morality', a morality formulated by, and suited to, those who suffered at the bottom of society. These persons had good reason to celebrate virtues that minimised suffering and maximised group solidarity. Slave morality succeeded by a combination of humility and hopeful arrogance. It encouraged a **view of life as intrinsically unhappy and unfulfilling**, and pointed to the emptiness of even the greatest accomplishment in life. It showed the vanity of the greatest luxury and the futility of ambition. It emphasised the evils of power, wealth and leisure time – all the things enjoyed by the master class, and unattainable by the slaves. However, the slave morality also made bold promises: that slaves were 'the chosen people' and that whatever their current circumstances, the 'meek shall inherit the earth'. Thus, it rationalised the plight of the slaves and at the same time provided an abstract reassurance, even a sense of superiority.

The morality of the master does not look like a morality at all, at first glance. It places little emphasis on what one should do. Humility is viewed as a weakness, rather than strength, 'turning the other cheek' is a sign of cowardice, and wealth, far from being the root of all evil, is viewed rather as a necessary presupposition of the good life.

The history of Western morality is the story of the 'transvaluation' of two moralities: that of a downtrodden group of slaves, and that of the powerful masters whom they served. Slave morality rationalise humbled circumstances and disappointment in life. It also aimed at maintaining one's self-esteem in the face of constant humiliation. The superiority felt by the slaves who see themselves as the chosen people, and look forward to a day when they will take over from their present masters provides not only a rationalisation, but also a weapon.

The 'incredible act of revenge' is, according to Nietzsche, the way in which an impoverished group of slaves managed to impose their values on the proud and powerful masters of the ancient world, and indeed eventually obscured the master morality altogether, so that today, morality means nothing other than what the slaves meant by it.

This was possible because of a metaphysics learnt from Plato, and augmented by a powerful set of theological sanctions. Plato's metaphysics combined with the Hebrew God resulted in a most seductive and powerful idea. The ancient Hebrews already had the conception of an all-powerful God who looked over them. Socrates' appeal to the otherworldly emphasised, as ancient Judaism did not, the transience and unreality of this world compared to another 'world of being', which was eternal. Together, they could be turned into a weapon that could be used not only in defence of the weak, but also offensively, if the Hebraic God were to extend his concern beyond the small group of chosen people to every human soul. Belief in God was now mandatory, and with that belief came Christian (slave) morality, with its emphasis on humility, equality under God, and charity, precisely what was needed by the unfortunate slave populations for them to demand a right to equality and an end to bondage. This process took place over hundreds of years, and achieved success only in the past hundred years or so.

Slave morality is essentially a reaction against the humiliation and oppression of slavery, and the superiority of the ruling class. It has no values of its own. What the masters valued as good, the slaves declared to be evil, and what was good was the absence of

evil. Thus, the good man could be a man with few charms or talents, and the virtues tend to involve abstinence rather than enjoyment and achievement. Morality consists, not of values, but of principles that tell us what not to do. But that this is a façade for an absence of values is, Nietzsche says, becoming dangerously apparent in the treacherous world of late nineteenth century politics.

It is Nietzsche's aim to pull down this façade for nihilism, whatever form it might take. But, it must not be thought that in attacking morality, Nietzsche is rejecting the possibility of values. He sometimes speaks of 'moralities' indicating that his objection is to one variety of moral thinking, and not to morals as such. Furthermore, he often defends traditional virtues, such as courtesy and courage, clearly indicating that in rejecting traditional virtues, he does not intend to reject all of the values that it embodies.

Nietzsche sees the master and slave as two types of person, defined not by class or culture, but by natural constitution. Some are strong, independent, energetic, creative and ambitious, while the majority of persons are weak, dependent, easily tired, conformist and resigned. These temperaments are innate characteristics and one could no more aspire to be the other than a lamb could aspire to be an eagle. Where history favours a slave morality Nietzsche encourages a masterly morality in which individual excellence and creativity are prized above conformity and obedience.

In this connection, I must briefly mention Nietzsche's most celebrated ideal – the Übermensch.

Nietzsche and the Übermensch

The Übermensch idea hardly appears in Nietzsche, except in Zarathustra. No really specific characterisation of the Übermensch is really provided, even here. As the ideal we are meant to pursue in our capacity as humans, it is a goal of singular unspecificity. Nietzsche contrasts the Übermensch with what he calls the Last Man (*der Letzte Mensch*) who is and wants to be as much like everyone else as possible. The Last Man is merely happy to be happy. This Last Man is the herd man of contemporary life, and Nietzsche-Zarathustra holds him in contempt. These are men who feel that human nature cannot be changed. Against this, Zarathustra says:

Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

All beings have created something higher than themselves. And would you be the ebb of this great flood, and return to the animals rather than overcome man?

Man is a rope ties between beast and Übermensch – a rope across an abyss.

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal. What can be loved in man is that he is an overgoing and an undergoing (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1964:6/9).

Nietzsche is saying that we perish as mere human beings in order to become something higher. Human life is a sacrifice to something that is attainable by us. We are less than we might become, and the higher fulfilment of ourselves as humans is what we should seek. Nietzsche, unfortunately, leaves things open with regards to what we specifically must do in seeking this higher fulfilment. His sister assured Hitler that he was what her brother had in mind by the Übermensch. Some writers have assumed that Nietzsche meant some specific model. Although Nietzsche held men like Goethe, Napoleon, Michelangelo, Julius Caesar and Cesare Borgia in great esteem, it is futile to say that our ideal should be to be like them. It is not the point to look to the past for examples.

Nietzsche is saying that we should seek to keep our passionate as well as our intellectual life in our command.

Thus, the Übermensch is merely a joyous, guiltless, free human being, in possession of instinctual drives that do not overpower him. He is the master of his drives, and so is not merely a product of instinctual discharge and external obstacle.

Nietzsche's great misfortune has been the literalness with which even his most sympathetic critics have interpreted him. Nietzsche seems to have believed that the Übermensch ideal was not going to be attained automatically, or realised through the natural course of events. In this respect, his doctrine is anything but Darwinian. We know, in fact, that he believed it was the 'unfit' that survive and prevail, and that more and more individuals who are more and more alike will crowd out the exceptional individual who might break through to a new perspective.

According to Dennett, Nietzsche's most important contribution to sociobiology is his steadfast application of one of Darwin's most fundamental insights to the realm of cultural evolution. He notes that **this** insight has notoriously been overlooked by the Social Darwinists and some contemporary sociobiologists. Dennett calls their error the 'genetic fallacy': the mistake of inferring current function and

meaning from ancestral function and meaning. As Darwin put it, 'Thus throughout nature almost every part of each living thing has probably served, in a slightly modified condition, for diverse purposes, and has acted in the living machinery of many ancient and distinct specific forms (1892:274). And as Nietzsche put it;

...the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master; and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which all previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated. [1967, Second Essay, sec 12, 77]

According to Dennett, this is pure Darwin! He illustrates another place where Nietzsche emphasises another classical Darwinian theme:

The 'evolution' of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* towards a goal, even less a logical *progressus* by the shortest route and with the smallest expenditure of force-but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defence and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. [1967, Second essay, 12, 77-78]

Dennett claims that the upshot of Nietzsche's genealogy is that we must be extremely careful not to read into the history we extrapolate from nature any simplistic conclusions about value:

The question: what is the value of this or that table of values and 'morals'? should be viewed from the most diverse perspectives; for the problem 'value for what?' cannot be examined too subtly. Something, for example, that possessed obvious value in relation to the longest possible survival of a race (or to the enhancement of its power of adaptation to a particular climate or to the preservation of the greatest number) would by no means possess the same value if it were a question, for instance, of producing a stronger type. The well being of the majority and the well being of the few are opposite viewpoints of value: to consider the former *a priori* of higher value

may be left to the naiveté of English biologists [1967, First Essay, sec 17.]

Here it is Spencer, and not Darwin, whom Nietzsche is accusing of a naiveté about value. Both Spencer and Rée thought that they could see a straight line to altruism, which Nietzsche felt was naive.

Can we call Nietzsche a Darwinist?

The question as to whether Nietzsche actually read Darwin's works is a problematic one. Most writers, including Dennett, for example, admit that Nietzsche, like the majority of educated Germans of the time, probably never read Darwin. Yet, some authors, like Zeitlin, go so far as to claim that Nietzsche 'carefully read and pondered *The Origin of the Species and The Decent of Man* (Zeitlin, 1994:5). The evidence available with regards to this issue does not convince one to support one nor the other view. According to Stern:

'The ethnological, historical and sociological views on which Nietzsche bases his moral observations are mostly derived from random collections of data, chance impressions, snippets of information; and the biological knowledge on which he bases his notions of breeding, which are later revised, is rudimentary and seems amateurish, it hardly goes beyond the Darwinian tags current at the time' (Stern, 1985:62).

According to Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche 'was not a Darwinist, but only aroused from his dogmatic slumber by Darwin, much as Kant was a century earlier by Hume' (1989: preface). To label Nietzsche a Darwinist implies a failure to differentiate between evolutionism in general and the specifics of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. As was previously mentioned, Darwinism was a problematic term in the nineteenth century. There were confusions surrounding the nature and vehicle of heredity and the patterning of the evolutionary processes, and emphasis on the various aspects of Darwin's theory shifted, depending on the commentator. These indeterminacies in evolutionary theory are what Peter Bowler has called the 'non-Darwinian Revolution' – the proliferation of theories of evolution in the late nineteenth century which, while paying lip-service to Darwin's hypothesis of natural selection, nevertheless harked back to the older traditions of biology in seeking alternative engines of progress, stressing the orderly, teleological character of organic change.

Yet, according to Danto (1980, 223), aside from Nietzsche's dogged insistence that the unfit survive and the fit perish, which Danto considers to be a blind spot in Nietzsche's philosophy, it is hard to see why Nietzsche wished to count himself as an anti-Darwinian. Danto claims that Nietzsche's frequent anti-Darwinian utterances are based on virtually a pun. According to Nietzsche,

As regards the famous struggle for existence [*Kampf ums Leben*], it seems to me that this is asserted rather than proved. It takes place, but it is the exception. The general aspect of life is *not* need, nor starvation, but far more richness, profusion, and even an absurd prodigality. Where there is struggle, there is struggle for *power* (Quoted in Danto, 1980:224).

Danto claims that here, the word 'existence' is slightly twisted from its usage in connection with 'living' to its usage in connection with 'living well' or 'living poorly' – from a philosophical to an economic sense. Thus, the twist misleads. It suggests that we should not so much try to continue in life (to exist) as to sacrifice ourselves for something else, life not being worthwhile on any other terms. It goes without saying that creatures strive to persevere in existence, but it does not follow that they strive to persevere in a marginal existence. It would be the latter that Nietzsche is attacking, but then no one ever really held such a view. It would, at best, be an idea connected with nineteenth century economics, with doctrines of marginal yield and the iron law of wages and the Malthusian principles. These were involved in the discussion of Darwinism, and as I have previously mentioned, Darwin was stimulated by a reading of Malthus. But there is not the slightest implication in Darwin that the species strive for marginal existence. It is therefore difficult, in Danto's opinion, to justify the titles of so many of Nietzsche's aphorisms headed 'Anti-Darwin', or with words to that effect.

Conclusions

According to Danto:

As with much of the discussion of Darwinism, his (Nietzsche's) polemic was ideological rather than scientific, and it had scant bearing on the true interest and importance of Darwin's theories. Strictly speaking, then, there is no excuse for an extended discussion of Nietzsche's view of Darwin. He had some views of a private image he thought to be Darwin (1980:224).

In other words, Danto feels that one should not attempt to decide whether Nietzsche supported Darwin's views or not, because Nietzsche's views on Darwinian theory were distorted by their reception in the context of the nineteenth century.

I have shown that Nietzsche's relationship to science in general and to Darwin in particular is more complex than first meets the eye, in support of Dennett's argument. However, the Nietzschean texts contain statements that have seduced authors into trying to 'fit' Nietzsche's ideas into the Darwinian framework. As we have seen, this can be done, to a degree, but I would have to agree with Danto, that because of distortions and misreadings of the Darwinian theory at Nietzsche's time, one could perhaps call Nietzsche an evolutionist, but not a Darwinist.

Notes

1. '...Ander geleerd hoornvee heft mij derhalve van Darwinisme verdacht.'

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