

Nietzsche on the Deaths of Socrates and Jesus

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Abstract

As is the case with his similarly polymorphous dialogue with Socrates, Friedrich Nietzsche's career-spanning engagement with the figure of Jesus is ambivalent in the extreme. In the writings of the last year of his active life however, this self-professed "antichrist" is unwavering in his commendation of the Nazarene's character and posture *vis a vis* his martyrdom. Even more remarkable is the *Antichrist's* heretofore-ignored *tampering* with the most famous death-scene in the Western tradition. This paper examines Nietzsche's bold manipulation of the celebrated death-scenes of Jesus and Socrates, with particular attention paid to the possible relationship between his re-writing of the famed proceedings at Calvary, and his remarkably high regard for Jesus' exit from the stage of life.

To characterize Nietzsche's career-spanning engagement with the figure of Jesus of Nazareth as "ambivalent" is an understatement indeed. As is the case with his similarly enduring and polymorphous dialogue with Socrates, Nietzsche's treatment of Jesus runs the gamut from heartfelt praise to the tendering of a quasi-psychiatric "case-history of sickness" (*WP* 152). The philosopher's Jesus is both "the noblest human being", and a "morbid" case of "retarded puberty" (*HH* 1, 475; *A* 29 & 32). In the writings of the last year of his active life however, Nietzsche is notably unwavering about at least one aspect of the Nazarene. In the pages of the *Antichrist* in general, and sections 33 through 35 in particular, Jesus' character and posture *vis a vis* his martyrdom are commended and indeed celebrated in a manner likely to surprise those unfamiliar with the noteworthy nuances that characterize much of Nietzsche's treatment of early Christianity.

Even more remarkable however, is the *Antichrist's* seemingly heretofore-unnoticed *tampering* with one of the most celebrated scenes in the Western tradition. To ensure

that the “redemption” offered at Calvary is one he *can* celebrate, and indeed endorse as altogether *real*, Nietzsche takes it upon himself to alter the Gospel account of the Nazarene’s dying conversation, just as he does Plato’s telling of Socrates’ final words. In this paper I will examine Nietzsche’s bold alteration of these celebrated death-scenes, with particular attention paid to the possible relationship between his re-writing of the famed conversation at Calvary, and his remarkably high regard for Jesus’ famous exit from the stage of life. Though this remarkable textual manipulation has thus far gone unobserved,¹ its discovery helps us to better understand both Nietzsche’s warm eulogy of Jesus, and just how highly unorthodox the *Antichrist*’s “psychology of the redeemer” really is.

Who is Nietzsche's Jesus?

Prior to the composition of the *Antichrist* in 1888, Nietzsche’s reflections on the figure of Jesus tended to be brief, scattered, and more suggestive than fully developed. Considered *en masse* however, a definite sense of direction emerges from these largely respectful early and middle period musings on the Nazarene. The Jesus of 1878’s *Human All Too Human*, through *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886 is a noble, sincere, and astonishingly loving figure, who is also inexperienced, immature, and sensitive to a worrisome degree. *Human, All Too Human* (1878) for example, characterizes Jesus as “the noblest human being” (1,475) and one “possessing the warmest heart” (1,235). Also found in this early work is the following observation:

Single exceptions stand out from the species, whether by virtue of great mildness and humanitarianism or by the magic of unusual energy; others are attractive in the highest degree because certain delusions inundate their whole nature with light – as is the case, for example, with the celebrated founder of Christianity who considered himself the inborn son of God and therefore felt he was without sin; ... (HH, 1,144).

This theme of the Nietzschean Jesus' perceived "freedom from sin" also informs aphorism 138 of 1882's *Gay Science*:

Christ's error – The founder of Christianity thought that there was nothing of which men suffered more than their sins. That was his error – the error of one who felt that he was without sin and who lacked firsthand experience. Thus his soul grew full of that wonderful and fantastic compassion for a misery that even among his people, who had invented sin, was rarely a very great misery.

At *Beyond Good and Evil* 269, Nietzsche writes:

Alas, he who knows the heart divines how poor, stupid, helpless, arrogant, blundering, more prone to destroy than save is even the best and deepest love! - It is possible that within the holy disguise and fable of Jesus' life there lies concealed one of the most painful cases of the martyrdom of *knowledge about love*: the martyrdom of the most innocent and longing heart which never had sufficient of human love, which *demand*ed love, to be loved and nothing else...

Nietzsche consistently paints this gentle Jesus in images of light and warmth, all the while casting the first century Jewish milieu in which he moves in terms of darkness, tears, hatred, and an impulse for revenge. One of the most developed early/middle period treatments of Jesus is found in the aphorism "Of Voluntary Death" in Part One of *Zarathustra*. This aphorism continues the theme of Jesus' apparent puerility, while sharply differentiating his spirit from the "tears and the melancholy of the Hebrews". Zarathustra tells his disciples:

Truly, too early died that Hebrew whom the preachers of slow death honor: and that he died too early has since been a fatality for many. As yet he knew only tears and the melancholy of the Hebrews, together with the hatred of the good and the just - the Hebrew Jesus: then the longing for death seized him. Had he only remained in the desert and far from the good and the just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and learned to love the earth – and laughter as well!

Believe it, my brothers! He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching had he lived to my age! He was noble enough to recant! But he was still immature. The youth loves immaturity ... (*TSZ*, 1, 21).

Like much of the writing from the last year of Nietzsche's career, the *Antichrist* condenses and reworks numerous motifs that run through his earlier work. With respect to the Nietzschean Jesus, while most of the themes encountered in the pages of the *Antichrist* - immaturity, sensitivity, sincerity, and above all, unmitigated love - are indeed leitmotifs reaching back at least a decade, what is novel (and to many, off-putting) are the extraordinary lengths to which Nietzsche extends and radicalizes these familiar hypotheses.

But there is another way in which the *Antichrist* distinguishes itself from Nietzsche's earlier discussions of Jesus. In keeping with a more general change in the language and trajectory of his philosophical enterprise in the last year of his creative life, explicitly clinical, quasi-medical terminology figures ever more prominently in an examination of Jesus that now increasingly comes to resemble a psycho-physiological case history. Indeed by 1888, Nietzsche has announced that (nihilistic) religions are to be understood as “systematized case-histor[ies] of sickness employing religious-moralistic nomenclature” (*WP* 152). Accordingly, whereas 1883's *Zarathustra* (1,21) suggests that the youthful Jesus “loves immaturity” and had much to learn about the subtleties of life, love, and laughter, *Antichrist* 32, written five years later, insists that

such a “type” is clearly to be construed as a case of “retarded puberty”. Similarly, while the author of 1882’s *Gay Science* is content to suggest that Jesus’ loving lifestyle and compassionate posture towards others is perhaps indicative of one “who lacked firsthand experience” in the world (*GS* 138), by 1888 the now self-professed “foremost psychologist of Christianity” not only tenders a diagnosis of “arrested adolescence”, but comes to devote growing attention to the Nazarene’s proposed “instincts”, “psychological type”, and “physiological *habitus*” (in O’Flaherty, pp.89 & 187; *A* 30 & 29).

Put simply, the psycho-physiological assessment of Jesus in the *Antichrist* is of a naïve and loving figure sensitive to the point of pathology. Nietzsche suggests that the reason the Nazarene comes to trade largely in an “inner world” of symbol and metaphor is to psychologically distance himself from, and reduce the importance of, an external reality that causes this dangerously sensitive soul an inordinate amount of pain. Nietzsche likewise hypothesizes that someone who *does not* resist those doing evil to him, who loves the very people torturing and executing him, is perhaps one who *cannot* resist; a damaged figure no longer capable of struggle or resistance. According to the Nietzsche of the *Antichrist*, Jesus’ extraordinary posture of unalloyed love and radical non-resistance is less a matter of religious conviction or theological revolution, than psycho-physiological necessity; “love as the sole, as the last possibility of life” (*A* 30).

Jesus' Martyrdom and Death

Turning now to a closer examination of what is so remarkable about the *Antichrist's* assessment of this vulnerable soul's martyrdom and death, we note aphorism 33's clever paralleling of the model of life (and death) offered by "the redeemer", and behavior bespeaking genuine Christianity:

It is not a 'belief' which distinguishes the Christian: the Christian acts, he is distinguished by a *different* mode of acting. Neither by words nor in his heart does he resist the man who does him evil. He makes no distinction between foreigner and native, between Jew and non-Jew... He is not angry with anyone, does not disdain anyone... The life of the redeemer was nothing else than *this* practice – his death too was nothing else (*A* 33).

At *Antichrist* 35 Nietzsche offers an even more precise rendering of the ultimate significance of Jesus' manner of dying:

This "bringer of glad tidings" died as he lived, as he *taught* – *not* to "redeem mankind" but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind is his *practice*: his bearing before the judges, before the guards, before the accusers and every kind of calumny and mockery – his bearing on the *Cross*. He does not defend his rights, he takes no steps to avert the worst that can happen to him – more, he *provokes* it... And he entreats, he suffers, he loves *with* those, in those who are doing evil to him. His words to the *thief* on the cross next to him contain the whole Evangel. 'That was verily a *divine* man, a child of God' – says the thief. 'If thou feelest this' — answers the redeemer — '*thou art in Paradise*, thou art a child of God.' *Not* to defend oneself, *not* to grow angry, *not* to make responsible... But *not* to resist even the evil man to *love* him (*A* 35).

As we see below, nowhere is Nietzsche more true to his intention to "say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book – what everyone else *does not* say in a book" (*TI* 9, 51), than this fertile passage.

First of all, it bears emphasizing that what both Nietzsche and the thief on the cross are responding to is not a doctrine or belief, but Jesus' behavior, his "practice", his "mode of acting". "What he bequeathed to mankind is his *practice*: his bearing before the judges, before the guards ... his bearing on the *Cross* ... he suffers, he loves *with* those, in those who are doing evil to him" (A 35).

For Nietzsche, such a wholly non-oppositional and loving practice is not only Jesus' embodied bequest to mankind, but is of course the hallmark of genuine Christianity. It is also the consequence of what he consistently characterizes as the Nazarene's morbidly susceptible condition.² "The consequence of such a condition", observes Nietzsche at *Antichrist* 33, "projects itself into a new practice...a different mode of acting". But the fact that Jesus' extraordinary posture towards others, his radically loving way of living (and dying) is seemingly dictated by his abnormally sensitive "condition", no more prevents Nietzsche from declaring it "sublime" (A 30&31), than the thief next to Jesus from recognizing something truly extraordinary. Indeed, it is precisely this ability to extract a condition of "blessedness" from both a "tear" and "hatred" (*TSZ*,1,21) filled Hebrew milieu and a precarious psycho-physiological "condition", that lies behind the philosopher's commendation of the Nazarene as explicitly "sublime". So it is that *Antichrist* 33's closes by celebrating Jesus'

profound instinct for how one would have to *live* in order to feel oneself 'in Heaven', to feel oneself 'eternal', while in every other condition one by *no* means feels oneself 'in Heaven': this alone is the psychological reality of 'redemption'. – A new way of living, *not* a new belief.

Again, what is here being celebrated, what Nietzsche characterizes as both “profound” and “sublime”, is “*not* a new belief”, but the Nazarene’s instinctive awareness of what behavior, what way of life, what posture towards others might allow him to experience a condition of “blessedness”; to feel himself “in Heaven” in spite of overtly non-Heaven-like circumstances (*A* 30&33). It is this all-important emphasis on Jesus’ *feeling* of “Heaven”, on the so-called “psychological reality of redemption” (*A* 33), that allows us to better appreciate the import of Nietzsche’s accentuation of the dying Jesus’ conversation with the thief on the adjacent cross.

His words to the *thief* on the cross next to him contain the whole Evangel. ‘That was verily a *divine* man, a child of God’ – says the thief. ‘If thou feelest this’ – answers the redeemer – ‘*thou art in Paradise*, thou art a child of God’ (*A* 35).

Even more significant than his remarkable suggestion that “His words to the thief on the cross next to him contain the whole Evangel”, is the fact that the all-important words here reported are *not* the words of the New Testament Jesus, but of Nietzsche himself. Nor do the words of Nietzsche's thief correspond to those uttered by the thief encountered in the Gospels. For the record, Luke, the only gospel writer to mention the conversation with the thief, reports one thief saying to the other (of Jesus); “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong”. To Jesus the thief continues: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Finally, Luke’s Jesus tells the thief; “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (23:41).

The Death of Socrates

With respect to this strange phenomenon of Nietzsche not only inserting his own words into the mouths of famous figures, but drawing conclusions about those figures based upon those words, we may note that he performs a similar piece of ventriloquy in the case of the dying Socrates. In that section of the *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) titled *The Problem of Socrates*, Nietzsche twice compels his Socrates to verbalise the unspoken sentiment traditionally ascribed to his life-culminating *Phaedo* reference to owing a cock to Asclepius. Writes Nietzsche:

Even Socrates said as he died: “To live - that means to be a long time sick: I owe a cock to the saviour Asclepius”. Even Socrates had had enough of it (1).

“Socrates is no physician,” he said softly to himself: “death alone is a physician here... Socrates himself has only been a long time sick” (12).

Since the tradition was to offer a cock to Asclepius, Greek god of medicine and healing, upon recovering from an illness, Socrates’ famous remark in Plato’s *Phaedo* (118a) has long been understood by scholars as suggesting a) that earthly existence is, or Socrates’ earthly life has been, an illness, and/or b) that death is the cure for the illness of life. While I will return to the sombre and suggestive conclusion that “Even Socrates had had enough of it” below, I now note that the actual words Nietzsche adds to Plato’s account of Socrates’ death-bed speech are broadly in keeping with the familiar *life-as-illness*, *death-as-cure* understanding of this famous scene, and accordingly, do little to alter the conventional interpretation of the passage in question.³

By way of contrast, by having Jesus tell the thief — “If thou feelest this ... *thou art in Paradise*” (A 35) — the philosopher clearly challenges convention by installing the matter of *feeling*, of subjective experience, at the very center of the proceedings. This is crucial, for, as Nietzsche makes explicit at *Antichrist* 33: Subjective experience is “the psychological reality of redemption”. The “redemption” embodied by Jesus is real enough for the later Nietzsche, but strictly in terms of inner experience, as a *psychological* salvation. By tinkering with Luke’s account of Jesus’ dying conversation, Nietzsche manages to almost invisibly add no less a voice than that of the Nazarene himself to support this fundamental *Antichrist* theme.

Also significant is the fact that Nietzsche’s Jesus announces: “thou art in paradise.” Even Luke’s Jesus, who does on occasion speak of his “kingdom” in the present tense tells the thief: “today you will be with me in paradise” (23:41). The all important, yet heretofore unexplored difference between these two promises — the difference between “you *will*” and “you *are*” — lies at the very heart of the *Antichrist*’s unusual vision of the “redeemer” and the “redemption” in question. One is a claim about a future, presumably after-death state of affairs. The other comments on an immediate, already existing “heavenly” reality: A psychological reality available *now*, available even to those, like the dying thief, in the midst of astonishingly non-heaven-like circumstances. It is *this* redemption, this sublime psychological reality, that the Nietzsche of 1888 is convinced lies at the heart of the Nazarene’s experience and good news. So convinced in fact, that he is willing to go to highly unorthodox lengths to ensure that “the redeemer”, *his* “redeemer”, makes precisely this point.

The 'Kingdom of Heaven' is a condition of the heart – not something that comes 'upon the earth' or 'after death'...[it] is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come 'in a thousand years' – it is an experience within a heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere..." (*Antichrist* 34).

Though he does not offer access to a literal other world, the *Antichrist's* Jesus is in fact proposing something perhaps even more radical than Luke's: That even a man dying an especially agonizing death can experience, in the midst and in spite of his torment, "paradise", a "blessed" condition of the heart. Not that he *will* see paradise, but that paradise is something that can be accessed, can be experienced, right now! "True life", observes *Antichrist* 29, "has been found, it is not being promised, it is here, it is in you". Accordingly, Nietzsche is not wrong when he announces: "His words to the *thief* on the cross next to him contain the whole Evangel" (*A* 35). If readers of Nietzsche are to fully understand the philosopher's final vision of Jesus however, it bears emphasis that the *words* in question, the *good news* in question, and the manner of *redemption* in question, are Nietzsche's.

Precisely the Main Thing

Later in the *Antichrist*, in the context of what he takes to be the early corruption of Jesus' message at the hands of the first Jewish Christians faced with the task of understanding his death, Nietzsche returns to the topic of "the exemplary element in his manner of dying". *Antichrist* 40 conjectures that:

Only now did the chasm open up: 'Who killed him? Who was his natural enemy?' – this question came like a flash of lightning. Answer: *ruling* Judaism, its upper class. From this moment one felt oneself in mutiny against the social order, one subsequently understood

Jesus as having been *in mutiny against the social order*. Up till then this warlike trait, this negative trait in word and deed, was lacking in his image; more, he was the contradiction of it. Clearly the little community had *failed* to understand precisely the main thing, the exemplary element in his manner of dying, the freedom from, the superiority over every feeling of *ressentiment*: – a sign of how little they understood of him at all! Jesus himself would have desired nothing by his death but publicly to offer the sternest test, the *proof* of his teaching...But his disciples were far from *forgiving* his death – which would have been evangelic in the highest sense...Precisely the most unevangelic of feelings, *revengefulness*, again came uppermost... But with this everything is misunderstood: the ‘kingdom of God’ as a last act, as a promise! For the Evangel had been precisely the existence, the fulfillment, the *actuality* of this ‘kingdom’. Such a death *was* precisely this ‘kingdom of God’.

Like aphorisms 33 and 35, *Antichrist* 40, in casting Jesus’ death in terms of “the sternest test, the proof of his teaching”, stresses the fundamental continuity between the Evangel’s message and his martyrdom. For the Nietzsche of 1888, Jesus’ death is to be understood as a telling confirmation, as a *consummation* of his life and message. In his death, as in his life, there was no resistance, no opposition, no anger, no “negative trait in word and deed”; only unalloyed *love*. What *Antichrist* 40 *adds* to this already discussed continuity is the suggestion of a relationship between Jesus’ extraordinary posture, and the all too ordinary posture of *ressentiment*.

Ressentiment

Nietzsche’s psychological emphasis on *ressentiment*⁴ as a deceptively powerful determinant underlying a vast range of human actions, sentiments, and valuations is without question one of his most important contributions to psychology. The philosopher ingeniously manages to locate what he takes to be evidence of *ressentiment* in such seemingly diverse matters as socialism, anti-Semitism, and Christianity’s emphasis on equality.⁵ But nowhere is this vengeful phenomenon more

apparent than in what Nietzsche characterizes as the “deadly contradiction” of “Judea against Rome”; in the worldview of subjugated first century Jewry.⁶ *This*, of course, is the milieu in which Jesus lived, loved, and died.

But as surely as *ressentiment* is to be understood in terms of animosity, vengefulness, and contrariety, so the later Nietzsche’s Jesus is ultimately to be understood in terms of the complete and utter *absence* of these traits. In essence, to define Jesus in terms of “the exemplary element in his manner of dying, the freedom from, the superiority over every feeling of *ressentiment*” (*A* 40), is to deliberately and diametrically oppose his spirit and embodied message to “the priestly nation of *ressentiment par excellence*” (*GM* 1,16) that surrounded him in life and seized upon his pliable message at his death.

One would be hard pressed to over-emphasize the significance of this image of Jesus as one having attained “superiority over every feeling of *ressentiment*”. That Nietzsche maintains that this “superiority” qualifies as the “main thing” about Jesus is hardly surprising. For to an even greater degree than his recurring characterization of the Nazarene as “noble” and “sublime” (*HH* 1,473; *TSZ* 1,21; *A* 31). Nietzsche’s notable emphasis on his *ressentiment*-free status puts Jesus in very rarefied (and autobiographical) company. Indeed, since *ressentiment* is virtually omnipresent according to the later Nietzsche, it is telling to consider whom, besides Jesus, the philosopher considers beyond this all too human quality.

Interestingly, Nietzsche places both his own name, and that of the Buddha, on the

very short list of individuals he believes achieved psycho-physiological “freedom” and “victory” over the “poison” of *ressentiment*.⁷ On a larger scale, it is noteworthy that, like his heartfelt celebration of the values embodied by the “well born” of the (pre-Christian) Roman Empire,⁸ Nietzsche’s ebullient praise of the Hellenic spirit is similarly rooted in his fundamental image of the (pre-Socratic) Greeks as a people acting largely from strength, joy, and natural nobility. Articulating the master-morality/slave-morality distinction for which his *Genealogy of Morals* is famous, Nietzsche writes of the Greeks:

the “well-born” *felt* themselves to be the “happy”; they did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their enemies, or to persuade themselves, *deceive* themselves, that they were happy (as all men of *ressentiment* are in the habit of doing) (*GM* I,10).

The Dying Socrates’ Revenge

Curiously related both to his emphasis upon the “well-born” of Greece’s absence of *ressentiment*, and his perhaps overzealous interest in the two most famous death-scenes in the Western tradition, is Nietzsche’s profound sense of *disappointment* with the final sentiments of the definitely *not* “well-born” Socrates.⁹ Though he applauds the courage, control, and calm demeanor of the dying Socrates,¹⁰ Nietzsche expresses grave concerns about what the Greek’s famous last words suggest about his final judgement of life itself. After confessing “I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said – and did not say,” that section of the *Gay Science* entitled *The Dying Socrates* goes on to lament:

I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might belong to a still higher order of spirits [*Geister*]. Whether it was the poison or piety or malice – something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said: “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.” This ridiculous and terrible “last word” means for those who have ears: “O Crito, life is a disease.” Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien while concealing all his life long his ultimate judgment, his inmost feeling. Socrates, Socrates suffered life! And then he still revenged himself – with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying. Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity? – Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks! (340)

Nietzsche’s palpable disappointment with his sometimes-admired Socrates is significant.¹¹ Clearly, Socrates’ “terrible” and *vengeful* last words, suggest to a disenchanted Nietzsche that the Greek’s apparent posture in life may have been inauthentic. Beneath his smiling demeanour Socrates may well have harboured hostility to life itself (surely the ultimate “blasphemy” in the mature Nietzsche’s philosophy).

As already indicated, unlike his re-telling of Jesus’ dying conversation, Nietzsche’s understanding of Socrates’ final words is not especially original. That the Greek’s last words express the view that *life is illness, and death the cure*, is in fact “the usual interpretation of the remark” (Gill, p.28). What *is* novel, is Nietzsche’s emphasis on the disturbing *negativity and vengefulness* of Socrates’ final conversation. “Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity?” (GS 340).

Of course Nietzsche, self-professed “psychologist without equal” (*EH* 3,5), is acutely aware of the tendency of life’s *failures* — suffering, impoverished humanity — to disparage existence; to vengefully view life through “the venomous eye of *ressentiment*” (*GM* 1,11). One need only read the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* — which locates in the first Jewish-Christians the paradigmatic example of what happens “when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values” (1,10) — to appreciate Nietzsche’s psycho-historical acumen. But compared to his strident accusations of *ressentiment* among the early Christians, he seems hesitant to identify such a vengeful posture in Socrates; the figure he, as a young professor, celebrated as “the first philosopher of *life*” (in Kaufmann, p.396). “Is it possible that a man like him ... should have been a pessimist?” (*GS* 340).

It is Socrates’ dying words that seemingly compel Nietzsche, self-described “unavoidable psychologist and reader of souls”, one who “never read[s] a word without seeing an attitude” (*BGE* 269, *A* 44), to reluctantly answer his own question in the affirmative. “Socrates, Socrates suffered life!” (*GS* 340). Confirming the “tortured ambivalence” that Tanner (p.14) locates in so much of his decades-long engagement with Athens’ gadfly, the mature Nietzsche is still able to be disappointed by Socrates’ final judgment on life. As Dannhauser correctly points out: “As opposed to his earlier interpretations of Socrates, Nietzsche now prefers the living to the dying Socrates” (p.174).

Nietzsche’s obvious dissatisfaction with what he takes to be Socrates’ dour final judgement upon life is all the more revealing when we consider that in the one volume

where he is explicitly compared to Jesus, 1880's *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, Nietzsche leaves absolutely no doubt as to where his preference lies.¹² Socrates is unambiguously said not only to be more intelligent than the Nazarene, but his cheerful disposition, his "wisdom full of roguishness", is said to "constitute the finest state of the human soul" (*WS* 86).

Conclusion

The Wanderer's unequivocal contrasting of Socrates' and Jesus' dispositions and minds serves to place the later Nietzsche's very different assessment of their famous deaths in sharp relief. Just as Socrates' negative deathbed judgement serves as testimony to the pervasive nature of revenge and *ressentiment*, so too does it serve as a reminder of just how remarkable a figure the Jesus of the *Antichrist* is. As Roth observes, the Jesus of the *Antichrist* is the very "opposite of no-saying" (p.366). He does "not begrudge death, but accept[s] it without revenge" (p.369). Free of the all too human impulse for revenge, even while suffering the most inhuman of executions, this "bringer of glad tidings" died as he lived, as he *taught - not* to 'redeem mankind' but to demonstrate how one ought to live" (*A* 35). Diametrically unlike the death of his Socrates, the death of the *Antichrist's* Jesus consummates and affirms his posture in life, and accordingly "offer[s] the sternest test, the *proof* of his teaching" (*A* 40). It is *this* posture, this martyrdom, this life-consistent death that Nietzsche eulogizes in 1888. That the thinker celebrating this altogether authentic and *ressentiment*-free death is Friedrich Nietzsche, the self-professed "antichrist" (*EH* 3,2), is remarkable. Remarkable too are the heretofore-unexplored lengths to which the *Antichrist* goes to find a death-scene worthy of such a eulogy.

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NOTES

¹ Jaspers (1967), Kaufmann (1974), Biser (1981), Natoli (1985), Roth (1990), and Kee (1999), all discuss Nietzsche's treatment of Jesus' martyrdom, but without reference to the philosopher's subtle manipulation of Jesus' dying conversation. Natoli (p.72) does quote *Antichrist* 35's account of Jesus' conversation with the thief on the cross, but does not address Nietzsche's alteration of it. Jaspers (pp.17-21), Roth (p.369), and Kee (pp.153-54) are right to emphasize the inner, psychological character and immediate accessibility of the Nietzschean Jesus' "Kingdom of Heaven", but seemingly fail to notice the highly unorthodox lengths to which the later Nietzsche's goes to support his fundamental vision of the Nazarene's "Kingdom" as an always-available, inner condition of the heart.

² At *Antichrist* 30 Nietzsche proposes that Jesus' posture of utter non-resistance may be traced to two psycho-physiological "realities".

Instinctive hatred of reality: consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and irritation which no longer wants to be 'touched' at all because it feels every contact too deeply.

Instinctive exclusion of all aversion, all enmity, all feeling for limitation and distancing: consequences of an extreme capacity for suffering and irritation which already feels all resisting, all need for resistance, as an unbearable displeasure (that is to say as harmful, as deprecated by the instinct of self-preservation) and knows blessedness (pleasure) only in no longer resisting anyone or anything, neither the evil nor the evil-doer – love as the sole, as the last possibility of life...

These are the two *physiological realities* upon which, out of which the doctrine of redemption has grown. I call it a sublime further evolution of hedonism on a thoroughly morbid basis.... The fear of pain, even of the infinitely small in pain – cannot end otherwise than in a *religion of love*... (A 30).

³ According to Tredennick: "The last words Socrates speaks show better than all the arguments what he believed... To himself Socrates was recovering, not dying. He was entering not into death, but into life, 'life more abundantly' " (p.40, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*). Elsewhere Tredennick asserts that Socrates' final remark "implies — with a characteristic mixture of humour, paradox, and piety — that death is the cure for life" (p.199, *The Last Days of Socrates*). Cooper likewise concludes that "Socrates apparently means that death is a cure for the ills of life" (p.153, *Plato: Five Dialogues*). On p.28 of his article "The Death of Socrates", Gill similarly affirms what he calls "the usual interpretation of the remark"; that Socrates had "recovered from the sickness of being alive". While the "*life-as-illness, death-as-cure*" interpretation of *Phaedo* 118a dominates the literature, it is by no means the only reading of Socrates' final words (see Crooks, 1998).

⁴ In the absence of a suitable German equivalent Nietzsche consistently employs the French "*ressentiment*". While it would not be wholly incorrect to substitute the English word "resentment", I join the philosopher in his use of the French form both in the name of consistency, and because Nietzsche's "*ressentiment*" often seems to denote bitterness, vengefulness, and hatred to a degree not normally associated with "resentment".

⁵ *Why the weak conquer*: "The anti-Semites do not forgive the Jews for possessing 'spirit' – and money. Anti-Semites – another name for the 'underprivileged'." (WP 864)

"The doctrine 'equal rights for all' - this has been more thoroughly sowed by Christianity than by anything else... it has forged out of the *ressentiment* of the masses its chief weapon against us, against everything noble, joyful, high-spirited on earth... Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against everything that which is elevated" (A 43).

⁶ “Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome”: there has hitherto been no greater event than *this* struggle, *this* question, *this* deadly contradiction. Rome felt the Jew to be something like anti-nature itself, its antipodal monstrosity as it were: in Rome the Jew stood “*convicted* of hatred for the whole human race”; and rightly, provided one has a right to link the salvation and future of the human race with the unconditional dominance of aristocratic values, Roman values. How, on the other hand, did the Jews feel about Rome? A thousand signs tell us; but it suffices to recall the Apocalypse of John, the most wanton of all literary outbursts that vengefulness has on its conscience. (*Genealogy of Morals* 1, 16.)

⁷ In Part Six of the section of *Ecce Homo* entitled “Why I Am So Wise”, Nietzsche writes:

Freedom from *ressentiment*, enlightenment about *ressentiment* — who knows how much I am ultimately indebted in this respect also to my protracted sickness! ... And nothing burns one up faster than the affects of *ressentiment*. Anger, pathological vulnerability, the impotence for revenge, the lust, the thirst for revenge, poison-mixing in any sense — for the exhausted that is surely the most disadvantageous way to react: it involves a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful secretions, for example of the gall bladder into the stomach. *Ressentiment* is what is forbidden *par excellence* for the sick — it is their specific evil — unfortunately also their most natural inclination. This was comprehended by that profound physiologist, the Buddha. His “religion” should rather be called a kind of *hygiene*, lest it be confused with such pitiable phenomena as Christianity: its effectiveness was made conditional on the victory over *ressentiment*. To liberate the soul from this is the first step towards recovery. “Not by enmity is enmity ended; by friendliness enmity is ended”: these words stand at the beginning of the doctrine of the Buddha. It is *not* morality that speaks thus, thus speaks physiology.

⁸ Greeks! Romans! Nobility of instinct, of taste, methodical investigation, genius for organization and government, the faith in, the will to a future for mankind, the great Yes to all things, visibly present to all the senses as the *Imperium Romanum*, grand style no longer merely art but become reality ... ruined by cunning, secret, invisible, anemic vampires! Not conquered — only sucked dry! ... Covert revengefulness, petty envy become master! (*A59*).

Nietzsche’s tendency to contrast the “natural” values of Rome with Judeo-Christian vengefulness and *ressentiment* is also evident at *Antichrist* 58 and 60, and the *Genealogy*’s first essay, “Good and Evil, Good and Bad”.

⁹ Socrates belonged, in his origins, to the lowest orders: Socrates was rabble. One knows, one sees for oneself, how ugly he was. But ugliness, an objection in itself, is among Greeks almost a refutation. Was Socrates a Greek at all? Ugliness is frequently enough the sign of a thwarted development, a development *retarded* by interbreeding. (*Twilight*, “Problem of Socrates”, 3).

¹⁰ *Birth of Tragedy* 13 speaks very favorably of Socrates’ “calm” in the face of death. At *Gay Science* 36 the deaths of Emperors Augustus and Nero are compared unfavorably with the “self-control” of “the dying Socrates”.

¹¹ Like his attitude toward Jesus, Nietzsche’s relationship with Socrates is long-standing, polymorphic, and highly ambivalent. Hundreds of references to Socrates can be found in Nietzsche’s published works, lectures, letters, and notebooks. Nietzsche’s Socrates is “the first philosopher of *life*” (in Kaufmann, p.396); “the true eroticist” (*BT* 13); “a monstrosity” (*BT* 13); a “turning point” of world history (*BT* 15); an embodiment of “the finest state of the human soul” (*WS* 86); and a “buffoon who *got himself taken seriously*” (*TI*, 2, 5). Kaufmann, who devotes a chapter of his *Nietzsche* (1974) to the interpretation of a number of Nietzsche’s comments (particularly his *favorable* comments) about Socrates, concludes (in his Introduction to the *Birth of Tragedy*) that the figure of Socrates is “deeply problematic” for Nietzsche. Both Dannhauser (1974), who devotes an entire book to this complex

relationship, and Tanner (1994) emphasize the fundamental ambivalence underlying so many of Nietzsche's remarks concerning Socrates. Writes Tanner: "The image of Socrates was never to let Nietzsche free; as with all the leading characters in his pantheon and anti-pantheon, his relationship with him remains one of tortured ambivalence" (p.14).

¹² "If all goes well, the time will come when one will take up the memorabilia of Socrates rather than the Bible as a guide to morals and reason", writes Nietzsche. Then, after championing those "modes of life ... directed towards joy in living", this calculatingly confrontational passage goes on to declare that:

Socrates excels the founder of Christianity in being able to be serious cheerfully and in possessing that *wisdom full of roguishness* that constitutes the finest state of the human soul. And he also possessed the finer intellect. (*WS* 86)

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