

Nietzsche on ‘The Question Mark’

A Note on Section 346, Book Five of *The Gay Science*

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Section 346 of the Book Five of *The Gay Science* by Nietzsche must belong to some of the most interesting passages in all of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Here Nietzsche talks about the role of value in human life. He also talks about the total loss of value and disenchantment of the world, and not only that we find ourselves in opposition to certain traditional values. The ‘Question Mark’ is mentioned at the beginning is a kind of topic for the Section, and toward the end Nietzsche mentions the Question Mark again: Human beings seem to face a dilemma — either accept the values or face nihilism, but Nietzsche’s point is that the values themselves can be nihilistic too. And this is perhaps the real meaning of the Question Mark. He does not explicitly provide a way out of this very debilitating dilemma. Furthermore, he also mentions that the teaching of the Buddha is an expression of self-denying, world-renouncing values that we ‘have turned our backs on.’

It is the contention of this paper that even though Nietzsche does appear to be advocating nihilism, he in fact does affirm life in a very interesting way. Through denying the traditional values as well as any attempt to negotiate those values on their terms, Nietzsche opens up a new vista which hitherto has not been possible. One must not miss the irony in the tone of his writing here. Hence the Question Mark—whether we must go down the traditional route of revering invented values, or face nihilism, or whether everything is nihilistic—is answered in the affirmative, or better in the ironic form. It is through nihilism that nihilism is destroyed, so opening up new vistas of possibilities. The Overhuman blazes a trail for himself through brandishing the nihilistic fire.

In this paper, I will examine the Section thoroughly; my assumption is that we can gain a glimpse of Nietzsche's thought better if we look at one aspect of his works very closely. This is so because Nietzsche's thoughts are highly complicated, and more importantly are not presented in a structured, linear manner typical of most philosophers. On the contrary, Nietzsche presents a huge jigsaw of thoughts and ideas, all connected to one another in a vast web of interconnected statements. This presents a challenge to anyone who tries to understand what he is up to, but perhaps a way to unravel these complexities could be found in a very close look at one small passage of his writing. If his thoughts are there in a vast interconnected network, then chances are that one node in the network could 'mirror' and 'be mirrored by' other aspects. Since his thoughts have no clear place where they begin and since the progress (if such a word can be used at all with how his ideas are developed and presented) of his thoughts is not linear at all, if we then focus upon one place very carefully, then there is a good chance that this close look could illuminate most of his thoughts. This is the technique I will be employing in this paper.

Let us then look at the Section in its entirety, starting with the first paragraph:

346. *Our question mark.* -- But you do not understand this?

Indeed, people will have trouble understanding us. We are looking for words; perhaps we are also looking for ears. Who are we anyway? If we simply called ourselves, using an old expression, godless, or unbelievers, or perhaps immoralists, we do not believe that this would even come close to designating us: We are all three in such an advanced stage that one--that *you*, my curious friends--could never comprehend how we feel at this point. Ours is no longer the bitterness and passion of the person who has torn himself away and still feels compelled to

turn his unbelief into a new belief, a purpose, a martyrdom. We have become cold, hard, and tough in the realization that the way of this world is anything but divine; even by human standards, it is not rational, merciful, or just. We know it well, the world in which we live is ungodly, immoral, 'inhuman'; we have interpreted it far too long in a false and mendacious way, in accordance with the wishes of our reverence, which is to say, according to our *needs*. For man is a reverent animal. But, he is also mistrustful; and that the world is *not* worth what we thought it was, that is about as certain as anything of which our mistrust has finally got hold. The more mistrust, the more philosophy.

We are far from claiming that the world is worth *less*; indeed it would seem laughable to us today if man were to insist on inventing values that were supposed to *excel* the value of the actual world. This is precisely what we have turned our backs on as an extravagant aberration of human vanity and unreason that for a long time was not recognized as such. It found its final expression in modern pessimism, and a more ancient and stronger expression in the teaching of Buddha; but it is part of Christianity also, if more doubtfully and ambiguously so but not for that reason any less seductive.

The whole pose of 'man *against* the world,' of man as a 'world-negating' principle, of man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the world who in the end places existence

itself upon his scales and finds it wanting--the monstrous insipidity of this post has finally come home to us and we are sick of it. We laugh as soon as we encounter the juxtaposition of 'man *and* world,' separated by the sublime presumption of the little word 'and.' But look, when we laugh like that, have we not simply carried the contempt for man one step further? And thus, also pessimism, the contempt for that existence which is knowable by *us*? Have we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition--an opposition between the world in which we were at home up to now with our reverences that perhaps made it possible for us to *endure* life, and another world that consists of us--an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: 'Either abolish your reverences or--*yourselves!*' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be--nihilism?--This is *our* question mark.¹

It is not much to say that this short passage contains much of Nietzsche's mature philosophy, especially those concerning nihilism and the revaluation of all values. Nietzsche says that he should not be described as one who is 'godless,' an 'unbeliever,' or an 'immoralist,' for he has gone much further than that. For him value means nothing at all except as a natural phenomenon, something that is clearly part of nature itself. To be a 'godless' person or an

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, pp. 285 – 287.

'unbeliever' means that one still operates within the confines of the gods, so to speak. One still refers to the gods and asserts that they do not exist, or one refers to an article of belief and asserts that it is not true. Either way one still refers to the entity which one wants to refuse. By talking about the gods, even when such a talk is a denial that the gods exist, one somehow surreptitiously maintains the gods in the discourse. One, in other words, still talks largely in the same language, inhabits the same conceptual world, as those who believe in the gods. However, for Nietzsche to be called 'godless' or 'unbeliever' or even 'immoralist' does not even come close to describing what he is in fact. He says, "[w]e are all three in such an advanced stage that one—that *you*, my curious friends--could never comprehend how we feel at this point." Nietzsche is no longer, strictly speaking, godless; he does not merely accept the gods or God through denying that He exists; on the contrary, he does not inhabit the conceptual world in which God resides all together. To see what this actually means one needs to imagine a situation where God is not in the picture at all. Since God used to function as the ultimate basis for all values and meanings, to live as if God does not matter at all, to live in such a way that even being 'godless' is too weak a description, would mean that the source of values and meanings cannot be found in any kind of transcendent source at all. Instead such a source can only be found in the mundane world itself, through pragmatic consideration of whether an action leads to desirable results or not. In such a situation, however, there might still be an occasion to talk about God or other transcendent beings; such a talk, nevertheless, must relegate God to be something directly tangible. God thus is a way for humans to answer to their needs. Thus Nietzsche, "We have become cold, hard, and tough in the realization that the way of this world is anything but divine." God seems to have been banished forever from Nietzsche's universe.

Banishing God from the universe means that Nietzsche's project does not include any act of valuation of the world itself; his is not a task of arguing that the world is worth less

than what it should be. To do that Nietzsche would still have to refer to some kind of foundation which presumably would function as the ultimate source of any form of objective valuation. Since Nietzsche wants to bring back valuation to the purely human and social realm, such an act of referring to this type of foundation would be untenable. Hence, for Nietzsche, there is no valuation of the world as being either better or worse than what it is, or as exactly what it is, for it is the act of valuation itself, one whose foundation lies in the supra-social realm beyond human enterprise, that is suspect here.

Nietzsche says that this kind of valuation through objective, supra-social foundation has its ancient source in Buddhism and also in Christianity, and in its modern expression one finds it in 'modern pessimism,' such as in Schopenhauer's philosophy. For Schopenhauer, the world is full of suffering because it is a manifestation of the cold, dark, impersonal Will; the suffering happens when the Will is frustrated, and it is only through complete denial of the Will, which amounts to nihilism, that true happiness can be achieved, a task which for Schopenhauer is almost impossible. This referring back to the Will as the ultimate source of valuation of things as either good or bad then is singled out by Nietzsche as an act of supra-social valuation which is ultimately untenable. Looking back toward the ancient sources, Nietzsche says, interestingly, that this reference to the supra-social source is found in Buddhism also. Presumably he thinks that according to Buddhism there is something that functions as the metaphysical source of normativity, this could be Nirvana, the state where all sufferings cease. But we have to bear in mind that the knowledge of Buddhism that was available to Nietzsche during his time was in its infancy, and many of the modern scholarships that have allowed people in the West to know more accurately about Buddhism were simply not available to him. So, one has to talk about the Buddhism as understood by Nietzsche as opposed to the real Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is apparent that here Nietzsche is criticizing the Buddha for engendering this kind of supra-human, supra-social form of

valuation. Perhaps, he means that the Buddha, by saying that the world itself is worth 'less' than Nirvana as the ultimate reality, set into motion the movement where people tried to *renounce* the world. Seeing that the world is full of suffering and is totally unsatisfactory, the Buddhist practitioner set about to release himself or herself from this world through rigorous forms of self-discipline. Now the story is familiar to Buddhists. It is through self-discipline that the defilements are washed away, resulting in the practitioner becoming liberated, thereby entering Nirvana.

But in fact Buddhism does not have to fall to Nietzsche's criticism at this stage. By renouncing the world, the Buddha does not mean that one should totally abandon the world and search for another, purer and cleaner one, which lies beyond it. In fact that seems to run counter to the spirit of the Buddha's thought in the first place. Nietzsche seems to believe that the Buddhist subscribes to the two world theory which is also there in Schopenhauer. The apparent world is unsatisfactory whereas the ultimate world is where truth really is. However, there is a tradition within Buddhism that maintains that the apparently two worlds are in fact one, and from the perspective of the doctrine of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) even this one world is itself empty of any inherent characteristics. This does not mean that the one world is an illusory one, but it means that this one world is characterized by causes and conditions, such that no part of this world can be held up and maintained that it is free from its causal and constitutive relation with all other parts.

Hence in Buddhism one does not value the world as either better or worse than some ideal world, because in the end both the worlds are empty of their inherent characteristics from the beginning. Here Buddhism agrees with Nietzsche. In fact Nietzsche's view of regarding values as entirely natural would not be too far from the spirit of Buddhism either, since the latter does not accept any supra-human source of normativity as do the theistic religions such as Christianity or Islam. For Buddhism, normativity always stems from the

fact that valuing something to be good is a result of it leading to a desired position. Since becoming released from suffering is the supreme good, then any action or decision that leads to this condition would be valued as good, and any action that leads to the opposite direction will of course be labeled as bad. Furthermore, Buddhism also agrees with Nietzsche that values are not there objectively as Kant argued. According to Kant, normativity stems from the basic facts of human beings as rational, autonomous agents each one deserving respect as ends and not means. In any case, Kant's normativity is objective in the sense that each human being's rational capacity is objective. However, in Buddhism, whether an action can be regarded as good or bad does not stem from some objectively existing foundation (either God or the human capacity to reason), but from whether the action can lead to what kind of results. Even the result that is taught by the Buddha himself to be the 'supreme goal' - since it signifies end of suffering—is in the ultimate sense a contingent one. The teaching is: If you desire to achieve the state of final liberation, then such a course of action and of believing would be *good* for you. Nothing is good or bad for you *per se*. Nietzsche would not have objected, had he learned that this is in fact the real teaching of Buddhism.

The last paragraph of Section 346 is the most important one, the climax of the piece. The reason why Nietzsche objects to any kind of confrontation between man and world - any attempt at representing the world to the consciousness of man so that the latter could judge it—is for Nietzsche untenable because that would be turning back to the judging through relying on the supra-human and supra-social foundation that he has already denigrated. Phrases such as 'man against the world,' 'man as measure of the value of things,' or 'judge of the world who in the end places existence itself upon his scales and finds it wanting' are all derivative of this assumption that there be an objective source of values and normativity which lies beyond simple human judgment. What Nietzsche appears to be advocating here is that, instead of accepting these supra-social source, humans should do better to recognize

things as they really are (since to believe that such extramundane source exists would be, in Nietzsche's worlds, a 'mendacious' way of looking at the world), and realize that values are only ways of conceptualizing the world in such a way that some desired results happen, and there is no way to guarantee that in all cases the results being desired now will always be desirable in the future. For Nietzsche, instead of separating man and world, we should do better by regarding man as part of the world itself. *Man* and *world* are one and are indivisible. This is also a Buddhist viewpoint.

Then in the last few sentences, the real climax of the passage, Nietzsche talks about an opposition, one between "the world in which we were at home up to now with our reverences," on the one hand, and "another world that consists of us--an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves." The former is the world that is familiar to us, one populated by God, the gods, spirits of all kinds which we are revering. This world is also Kant's world of objective morality based on human reasoning capability. Nietzsche says that it is this world that makes it possible for us to '*endure* life.' This kind of world can help us endure life because it gives us hope and the belief that things are as they should be. When we revere something we certainly believe that it exists and that it can help us go through our troubles. It is a comforting picture, but Nietzsche knows, and we know, that this world is no longer with us. Later on in Book Five, Nietzsche will say in a very famous passage that God is dead, meaning that the belief in God, the reverence that we have had with God, has already left us and it is we ourselves, human beings in the modern world, that are responsible for His death. God is alive in the former world, but in the latter world, world without ultimate, objective source of values, God can find no place to live.

From the perspective of those who believe in objective, supra-social normativity, a place where God (or the ultimate source of normativity according to Kant) can find no place to live would be a nihilistic one. Denying any ultimate source of normativity would be

tantamount to denying any objective morality, leading to a situation where only naked, raw power dominates. Nietzsche's dilemma toward the end of the passage: "Abolish your reverences, or—*yourselves*" is uttered precisely in this context. There is a choice--either you live in the world populated by God or the human power of reason which ensures objective morality, or you do not live anywhere at all since presumably everything becomes nihilistic at this point. If you do not abolish the reverences, then you yourselves are abolished instead. There would then be absolutely nothing for you to hold on to, nothing that will tell you what is right and wrong, and you are totally adrift in the alien world, since to act as if there are God or the gods would be mendacious any way. This is what Nietzsche probably means when he presents the following dilemma: if you do not abolish your reverences, then you abolish yourselves, since the gods are our own creation, affirming them and believing them to have power over us human beings would be to put them above us, thereby 'abandoning' ourselves. Nietzsche sees this as the major malady that afflicts modern people in his time, those in late nineteenth-century Europe, but by extension he means all of us who put our faith in something beyond ourselves. By doing so, we abandon and abolish ourselves.

In the last sentence of the passage, Nietzsche says that to abolish the latter horn of the dilemma, to abolish one's own self, is clearly an act of nihilism. The picture we have just seen is that if one does not abolish the reverences, if one still keeps God in the picture, then one, very ironically, embraces the nihilistic worldview. However, Nietzsche also says that to take on the first horn of the dilemma is also an expression of nihilism. What does it mean, then, to say that the first horn, to abolish all reverences, is nihilistic? We understand the second horn well enough, when we ourselves are 'abolished' as a result of maintaining all sources of extra-human normativity, we have the very ironic nihilistic picture maintained by Nietzsche through his depiction of external situation where God is already dead. But here Nietzsche says that even the very act of abolishing all reverences is nihilistic. And Nietzsche

strongly underscores this point by noting that this is the ‘question mark’ which is the topic of the entire Section. Perhaps the question mark signifies that when the first horn of the dilemma is taken, then what is abolished is the very identity of people themselves. On the contrary, in order for the new kind of being to come forward, one which has no regard for the traditional system of morality and one who takes the matter to one's own hand, all the reverences to the old system of morality have to be relinquished totally. Here is a reference, then, to the Overhuman, the kind of being advocated by Nietzsche, exemplified by Zarathustra, a being who invents his or her own values and lives by them, a being who has no regard for either God, the gods, or the human rational power. All the references to the old God or the human power of reason as the source of normativity have to be abolished, done away with, before this new kind of self emerges.

In conclusion, then, the ‘question mark’ in the Section refers to the question as to what would happen if human beings embraced the nihilism that is implicit in their choice when they ‘abolish all reverences.’ That is, when they themselves act as does Nietzsche himself when he goes beyond being merely ‘godless’ and ‘unbelieving.’ What would happen to humans when they dispel all kinds of metaphysical, putatively objective, sources of normativity? The answer is that one needs to be Overhuman, one who takes care of the task of inventing new values by himself. This does not have to mean that the Overhuman can act whatever way he pleases, but it does mean that any choice that the Overhuman is making is ultimately something that only he himself is responsible.