

Christianity without *Ressentiment*:

Nietzsche's Jesus, Weak Theology, and the Possibility for a New Christian Ethics

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(Editor's note: This paper was first presented at the ACTC Student Conference at Saint Mary's College of California on February 7, 2009.)

Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* harbors within it a surprising anomaly. The book's uncompromising indictment of Christian morality is accompanied by a creative reformulation of Jesus' life and message that Nietzsche expounds with, one could not call approval, but perhaps dimmed admiration. Traditional Christian morality, for Nietzsche, emerges out of the weak's *ressentiment* against the strong and the ensuing struggle for power, with the weak using concepts like "sin" to discipline the members of their community, paralleling the construction of and fixation upon a demonized Other, against which the community defines itself. Jesus, as Nietzsche creatively envisions him, lives beyond good and evil, has no enemies, and lives according to a philosophy that completely eradicates moral distinctions. Nevertheless, it is possible to navigate between these two unsatisfying poles that Nietzsche presents: on the one hand, a strong theology of hypocritical, hidden power, and on the other hand, a Jesus with no theology, no political commitments, and the complete collapse of the differentiation between good and evil. Between these poles lies the possibility for a weak theology that does not harbor *ressentiment* but instead holds a permeable division between friend and enemy, good and evil. This permeable division allows a weak theology to remain insistent in its demand for justice, although the full definition and comprehension of justice remains always allusive and capable of constant reformulation. Through his distinction of law and justice, John Caputo presents this possibility of love without hypocrisy that successfully navigates between these two poles. This

reformulation of Christianity helps push Christian theology beyond its own limits, exposes the unacceptable *ressentiment* behind Christian morality, and suggests the possibility for new Christian ethics.

Christianity holds an established set of moral values on the basis of which it sets itself in opposition to “the world,” or its enemies. Nietzsche interrogates these values by analyzing their genealogy and revealing the whole matrix of circumstances surrounding their historical emergence. These values, Nietzsche contends, embody their history, and thus their history can help us “get behind” the values, which present themselves as ahistorical and eternal, but which are in fact only a combination of creative articulation and psychological reaction in response to specific historical circumstances. In this way, Nietzsche presents one premise and one project. The premise is a thoroughgoing immanence, in which all higher values claiming origin in a transcendental realm (claims dictated by God or Reason) can be understood as emerging out of the lower human faculties (namely, the instincts). He contends, “‘Belief’ has just been a cloak, a cover, a *curtain* behind which the instincts play their game... people have always talked about ‘faith,’ [but] they have always *acted* from instinct...” (35). The project is twofold: a demythologization of values, followed by a reconstruction of values in light of these insights. Nietzsche presents the history of Christian values as representing an arsenal of strategically useful tools for one group of individuals to overthrow their physically overpowering oppressors. Thus, behind a discourse of love and humility, Nietzsche points out *ressentiment* and a striving for power. This gap between the discourse of love on the one hand, and the motivating, subterranean hate on the other, is rooted in the material conditions of Christianity’s emergence, namely, the disequilibrium of power (and the subsequent struggle for it) between the weak and the strong. The values of the weak, Nietzsche contends, must be understood through this

interpretive framework, which exposes the power-relations, or “the hidden need for revenge,” behind the most munificent of values (63). The articulation of the *afterlife*, which Nietzsche calls “selfishness increasing *shamelessly* to the point of infinity,” arose in the same way, almost as a culmination of this *ressentiment* (37). The very structure of the afterlife into this sharp opposition between the faithful receiving unlimited reward (which was desired, but unattainable, in this life) and the sinners receiving unlimited punishment certainly looks like what John Caputo calls the fulfillment of “psychoanalytic fantasy,” marking “the removal of all the limits imposed by reality, carrying out an action in an ideal space where there is absolutely perfect control and not a trace of resistance from the real” (*Weakness of God* 79-80). The division between the in-group and out-group is fortified by the disciplinary mechanism of “sin,” which is “indispensable in every society organized by priests... the real lever of power” (Nietzsche 24). The centrality of otherworldly rewards and punishments elevates this opposition of a rigidly defined in-group and a demonized Other (and the accompanying opposition between good and evil) into an ahistorical and thus eternal phenomenon.

Nietzsche’s important insight is that the apparently ahistorical opposition between good and evil in fact arises out of a specific, historical struggle for power, and thus represents not the voice of God but a specific strategy for acquiring power against a specific enemy. It is only after covering over the traces of its historical origination that the moral law can present itself as having “a divine origin, arriving whole, complete, without history, a gift, a miracle, simply communicated” (Nietzsche 58). This demythologization of values allows us to remove good and evil from their rigid location in a metaphysical-theological apparatus, and bring them back into the historical world of flux, change, and struggle. The unjustifiable universalization of the particular is cancelled, and ethics are now without transcendental origin or justification. Where

does one go from here? In the middle of *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche offers one possible response, making the paradoxical move of presenting Jesus as the figure standing firmly opposed to the *ressentiment*-driven Christianity that has developed in his wake as a possible and potentially more satisfying alternative.

Nietzsche suggests that beneath the metaphysical-theological construction of Christianity, which was driven by the frustrated will-to-power of the Apostle Paul and the early Christian community, there was Jesus, basically a Buddhist peace figure who, to Nietzsche's admiration, lived his life beyond good and evil. His life is characterized as "the polar opposite of struggle, of any feeling of doing-battle... an incapacity for resistance... blessedness in peace, in gentleness, in an *inability* to be an enemy" (Nietzsche 26). Jesus is unwilling to make the distinction between friend and enemy, between good and evil; any dogma, no matter how flexible, concerning sin or repentance, is antithetical to his way of being-in-the-world, which represents a kind of aesthetic immersion into the pure flux of the present experience. Jesus did not detest his weakness or resent his superiors; he did not allow himself to harbor a frustrated will-to-power capable only of value-creating *ressentiment*, but instead Jesus treated his weakness and his circumstances in general with a blissful indifference. In sharp contrast to his followers, who in their weakness formulated a self-empowering and hypocritical set of values, Jesus did "not care for solid things: the word *kills*, everything solid *kills*. The concept, the *experience* of 'life' as only he knew it, repelled every type of word, formula, law, faith, or dogma" (Nietzsche 29). The message, throughout his life and up to the cross, was, "*Not* to defend yourself, *not* to get angry, *not* to lay blame ... But not to resist evil either, — to *love* it..." (Nietzsche 32). Jesus demonstrates "the exemplary character of dying in this way, the freedom, the superiority *over* every feeling of *ressentiment*" (Nietzsche 32). Thus, there is no formulation of moral dogma or

articulation of otherworldly judgment, as these would only detract from aesthetic enjoyment of the present experience and impose artificial divisions onto a world of pure becoming.

This narrative of Jesus beyond good and evil, regardless of its historical accuracy, stands in distinct opposition to Christianity and at the same time illuminates it. In some sense, Nietzsche helps reveal two distinct strands harbored within Christianity itself, one striving for power and the other extolling weakness, which is why Christianity “[vacillates] wildly between the heights of power and the depths of weakness” (*Weakness* 8). On the one hand, an authoritarian doctrine of otherworldly judgment springs, as a creative projection, out of the weak’s dreams for worldly power. The Jews’ unfulfilled yearning for a messianic political revolutionary ready to strike down the armies of Rome is articulated as the Jesus found in the *Book of Revelation*, who “judges and makes war... [with] armies of heaven ... following him... Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter’” (Rev 19:11-15). The other strand consists of an emancipatory doctrine of love beyond good and evil without *ressentiment*, which is represented by Nietzsche’s Jesus, who lives a life of non-resistance and non-judgment, who is occasionally found scattered across the pages of the New Testament. In the authoritarian strand, the distinction between good and evil, friend and enemy, is established as an unchanging and fixed barrier that sharply defines the group of believers in opposition to the demonized Other, who is only admitted into the group, and thus authentically loved (without *ressentiment*) not *as Other* (not as the unrepentant Other), but only *as potentially Same* (the assimilated Other). Thus, the extension of love without *ressentiment* is conditioned. In the second, emancipatory strand, the distinction between good and evil, friend and enemy, is eliminated entirely, and love is thus truly unconditional: the Other is loved as Other. Here, community, which by definition has an inside and an outside, is

dissolved. Neither strand of the Christian tradition is, in itself, acceptable, as the former is unsatisfying because of the dogmatically conditioned nature of love, while the latter is unsatisfying because, by eliminating moral distinctions, it forfeits the demand for justice and social transformation. Is there a synthesis of these opposing strands, or must we live and act in and through their irresolvable tension? It seems that the only satisfying solution is that the two strands must remain in tension. The best way to illustrate this is through Caputo's commentary on law and justice.

The real crux of the problem within Christianity lies in *where* and *how* the distinction between good and evil, friend and enemy, is established. With Nietzsche's demonstration that the original division was established not through divine command (which would make it eternal), but by emerging out of specific historical struggles and concerns, one is now in a position to recognize the distinction as fluid and capable of re-articulation in each particular historical instance. A useful way to think about it is through the distinction between law and justice. Caputo explains that law represents the "positive structures that make up judicial systems of one sort or another, in virtue of which actions are said to be legal, legitimate, or properly authorized" (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 130). The law, be it legal or moral, must never rigidify or become fixed but must remain open to endless reformulation precisely in light of the fact that it was "historically instituted or constituted, forged and framed, ratified and amended" (*Deconstruction* 130). When the law becomes rigid, it becomes blind and oppressive, and justice must hold the law open, accountable, and capable of revision in light of the particular case. The law, as the universal rule, can never apply perfectly to the particular case—this application is always in some way violent and imperfect. Justice, always on the side of singularity, puts the law in question, as it "[stretches] the constraints of the law to include the demands of justice in a new,

different, and singular situation” (*Deconstruction* 137). Justice remains forever beyond our grasp, but not in the Platonic sense in which justice is an ahistorical Form, to some degree always obscure from our sight, but instead justice should be viewed as a thoroughly historical awareness to the subtle demands emanating from the silent face of the vulnerable Other, an awareness that never ceases developing. While the law is self-confidently posited without recognizing its own violence, for example, its own anthropocentrism, justice always upsets these presuppositions. Thus, in the same way that law needs justice in order to perfect itself and avoid becoming oppressive, justice needs law in order to materialize itself and resist injustice. Thus, without law and the differentiation of good and evil, there is nothing capable of identifying injustice and resisting it, but this approach must be accompanied by the awareness that the law is always partially blind and always susceptible to misidentifying good, or evil, if the singularity of each case is not allowed to hold the law in tension.

This view points toward the possibility of a reconstruction of Christian ethics. Nietzsche and Caputo help uncover this possibility which, at the level of the individual, elevates the indiscriminate and non-exclusionary act of love over the rigid and discriminate law, and on the social plane, articulates a community defined by heterogeneity, made up of the marginalized and without a sharply defined boundary surrounding it. By eliminating *ressentiment*, love no longer hides the self-interested pursuit of power, but reflects a genuine and authentic solidarity. In light of Nietzsche’s insights, one can begin sketching out a politics of solidarity. It is clear that the solidarity organized around Christian *ressentiment* is unacceptable, as it defines its internal identity as an afterthought subsequent to hostility towards the Other. It would here be helpful to incorporate Nietzsche’s distinction between good/bad and good/evil into this analysis. In traditional Christian morality, which is the result of the victorious slave revolt of morality, “evil”

replaces “bad” as a moral category. Under the aristocratic ethics of the strong, the category of “good” described their own strength, beauty, greatness, courage, etc., while “bad” emerged as an afterthought, simply labeling those who were *to be pitied*. For the weak, “evil” is generated out of an envious fixation with the aristocratic and the strong, while their own characteristics (weakness, simplicity, humility, etc.) are designated as “good” merely as an afterthought. The community of Christian *ressentiment* operates under the logic of good/evil, which is to say that the community assumes an identity only subsequent to their hatred of the Other. This community is characterized by hatred, fear, a drive for internal purity, and a fixation with those outside of it. On the other hand, the new kind of community that Nietzsche suggests would operate under a different logic, in which the articulation of good and evil, and thus the boundaries of solidarity, is not subsequent to demonizing the community’s Other; on the contrary, this new Christian community primordially finds itself vulnerable to the Other’s demands, ready to re-articulate its boundaries of solidarity in light of experiencing the Other. This willingness to remain open to renegotiating the law is demonstrated when Jesus, to the frustration of the religious authorities of the day, heals a man on the Sabbath, recognizing the inadequacy of the law in relation to the concrete, singular situation, which requires more than the blind application of the law but instead demands enacting inarticulable justice. Jesus’ insistence that the law was made for man, not man for the law, points to the need to de-naturalize the law, to keep it open lest it become oppressive, and to ensure that the encounter with the Other is always antecedent to the articulation of the law (Mark 2: 27). The Other always disrupts the law, always outstrips our attempts to formulate justice as law, and thus the new Christian community must express solidarity with the Other, must resist closing itself off to this experience of vulnerability in the face of the Other, and must actively cultivate an openness to this experience.

Solidarity can often go astray by rigidifying the law and closing off the possibilities for this experience—one thinks of old forms of socialism that insisted upon social justice whilst remaining xenophobic or anti-immigrant. The Other, or the Neighbor, must remain a placeholder for difference—be that difference spatial, temporal, racial, religious, etc—and must always hold our notions of law in tension, and challenge our boundaries of community and solidarity (Hardt).

A reevaluation of Christian values is called for in light of Nietzsche's critique. Can one love the Other as the Other, and can a community of otherness materialize around this radical love? Can we remain humble enough to hold our moral distinctions and laws tentatively enough to be prepared to constantly rearticulate them in light of experiencing the Other, instead of using them to mark the Other as dangerous and thus closing ourselves off from her? These questions come to us from the far corners of the Christian tradition, questions that only we can answer.

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