

UNITED WISDOM

Nietzsche and the Abyss: The Man Who Looked Within Without Softening the View

The Person and the Inner World

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> ***Archival editor's note.*** *This is a full translation of the supplied Russian archive, including its polemical language. The psychological reading of Nietzsche, sweeping accounts of moral history and political movements, and comparisons with Jung are authorial interpretations, not independently verified scholarly consensus. The speculation about Nietzsche's illness and the claim that a method saved Jung are not established medical explanations. References to homeopaths do not establish medical authority; the source's use of disability as a disparaging metaphor is retained for fidelity, not endorsed. Quotations and source attributions are inherited and have not been freshly authenticated. This essay does not prescribe intensive "shadow work," diagnose readers, or equate thoughts and feelings with harmful actions.*

"If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." The line has become a cliché. In Nietzsche's context, it stops being an aphorism and becomes a precise description of what people discover within themselves when they take inner work seriously: the dark side will not disappear through denial. It waits.

I. Aphorism 146

In 1886, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes a short aphorism numbered 146:

"Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein" (Wikiquote: Beyond Good and Evil, Aphorism 146).

In Svasyan's Russian translation: "Whoever fights monsters should beware of becoming a monster in the process. And if you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."

This is perhaps the most quoted line of twentieth-century philosophy. It serves as an epigraph to films about serial killers, books about trauma, and articles on moral corruption. People who have never read Nietzsche quote it.

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There is nothing wrong with that. The aphorism works on its own. But if we read it in the context of the rest of Nietzsche — which is what we will try to do here — it stops being merely a striking phrase. It becomes a compressed formulation of something Nietzsche understood before the psychoanalysts, before Jung and Freud: people have a dark side; denying it will not make it go away; it waits.

In the previous article in this series, we spoke of the “devil” as a religious name for the shadow. Nietzsche is, among other things, the philosopher who stripped that religious name from the shadow and left it naked. Without a god to permit or forbid it. Without a devil onto whom it can be shifted. Simply: here it is, yours; do what you will with it.

II. What came before Nietzsche

To understand the scale of his gesture, we need to understand what he stood on.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, European moral philosophy was arranged roughly as follows. There is the human being, capable of goodness. There is moral law, given by God for Christians or discovered by reason for Kantians. The human task is to follow that law. Whatever within a person contradicts it is either temptation, from the devil; weakness, from the flesh; or error, from ignorance. In every case, it is something to be overcome.

This arrangement rested on one assumption: human beings naturally strive toward good. They may err, they may fall, but fundamentally they are good. This is Christianity's inheritance in secularized form. God has departed, but the idea of “original goodness” remains.

Nietzsche begins by destroying that assumption.

III. Suspicion

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche asks a question nobody before him had seriously asked.

Not “What is good?” — Plato, Aristotle, and Kant had asked that — but “Where did our idea of good come from?” What is its source? Who first said “this is good and that is bad,” and why?

Nietzsche's answer is revolutionary.

Modern morality, he says, did not come from heaven. It was not discovered by reason. It emerged historically at a particular moment, as a rebellion of the weak against the strong (Wikipedia: Genealogy of Morality).

In archaic society, Nietzsche argues, the strong, healthy person capable of acting was called “good.” The weak, sick, incapable person was called “bad.” This was “master morality,”

Herren-Moral: a judgment from within the strong person who looks at the world and sees: here I am, good, strong, noble; those others are weaker, smaller, worse.

Then, Nietzsche says, an overturning takes place, the *Sklavenaufstand in der Moral*. The weak, unable to act physically against the strong, begin acting against them at the level of values. They invent a new vocabulary. They say: “No, you strong people are evil. We, the weak, are good.” They call your health sin. Your merriment vanity. Your pride arrogance. Your body unclean. And they promise you hell.

This is “slave morality,” *Sklaven-Moral*. According to Nietzsche, it underlies Christianity and, through Christianity, the entire moral sensibility of modern Europe.

Notice: Nietzsche does not say that slave morality is untrue. He says it arose from a particular psychological situation: powerlessness and *ressentiment*, the French word he uses for the accumulated, unexpressed resentment of the weak toward the strong. It is revenge at the level of words. Brilliant, centuries-long, effective revenge.

Here is the question. If modern morality arose from ressentiment, what is there in the modern person besides this morality? What lies beneath it? And above all, what is there within that person that created the morality?

IV. The abyss within

Here we return to Aphorism 146.

Nietzsche's “abyss” is not cheap poetry. It is a working term for what lies beneath the layer of morality, beneath what people know and say about themselves: what really moves them before they rationalize their actions as “good” or “bad.”

What lies in that abyss? Nietzsche offers several answers.

The first is the will to power, *Wille zur Macht*. Everything living strives to expand, affirm itself, and overcome resistance. This is not a “lust for power” over others in the political sense. It is force seeking expression. In a plant it means spreading. In an animal, acting. In a human being, it means everything: artistic creation, love, war, thought, sex, politics. The will to power is neither “bad” nor “good.” It simply is.

The second answer is the instincts that slave morality declared inadmissible: aggression, sexuality, selfishness, pride, the desire for revenge, the desire for pleasure. Civilization did not destroy these instincts. It drove them inward. They continue living there.

The third is precisely those qualities people refuse to acknowledge within themselves. Before Jung, Nietzsche describes what Jung would later call the shadow. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he writes of “bad conscience,” *schlechtes Gewissen*: human aggression that, with no

outward outlet, turns against the person themselves (Genealogy of Morals notes, Beckman/HMC). Someone who cannot strike an enemy strikes themselves.

This is an exceptionally deep thought. Self-directed aggression, masochism, a painful sense of guilt: for Nietzsche, all of these are aggression turned inward. Not the absence of a dark side, but its inverted form.

V. The monster in you

“Whoever fights monsters should beware of becoming a monster in the process.”

Nietzsche addresses this warning, quite literally, to the reformer, the moralist, the fighter against evil: the person who knows very well where evil is and has devoted themselves to uprooting it.

What happens to that person?

First, they become obsessed with what they oppose. Someone who pursues evil begins to see it everywhere. Their attention is trained on one thing. They stop seeing the rest.

Second, they adopt the methods of their opponent. To defeat a monster, monstrous means are needed; otherwise victory is impossible. The inquisitor fighting heresy ends up torturing women to death. The revolutionary fighting oppression ends up instituting a terror worse than the old regime. The person fighting hypocrisy soon becomes a hypocrite because their own methods cannot meet the standard they proclaim.

Third — and this is the subtlest point — the very existence of the “enemy” becomes necessary. If there is no enemy, what will they do? Who will they be without an enemy? Without realizing it, they therefore prolong the enemy's existence. Unconsciously they sustain what they appear to be fighting.

This logic, written by Nietzsche in 1886, describes half the history of the twentieth century. Revolutions turning into new tyrannies. Anticolonial movements repeating the colonizers' methods. Feminism sometimes nurturing a female cruelty no less than male cruelty. Wars on terrorism generating new terrorism. This is not a cynical comment but a structural observation.

Whoever looks long into the abyss falls into it.

VI. And the abyss looks into you

The second half of the aphorism is stronger still.

“And if you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.”

What does that mean?

One level is naive, and everyone quotes it. Look at horror, and horror enters you. Work with suffering, and suffering colors your soul. This is true. Military psychiatrists know it. Social workers know it. Homeopaths know it.

But Nietzsche is speaking of something deeper. When you look into the abyss for a long time — into “evil,” the “shadowy,” the “inadmissible” — at some point you discover that it speaks to you. Something within you responds. Not with disgust but with recognition. “I understand what that is like.” “I could be like that.” “To some extent, I already am.”

It is a frightening moment. Until then, you could think evil belonged to others and you were its observer. Afterward, you know that observer and observed are of one nature. The abyss you are looking at is your own, enlarged and placed outside so it can be seen.

Jung, who knew Nietzsche well — he read him closely, referred to him often, and held two Zurich seminars devoted solely to *Zarathustra* — later formulates this technically: “evil” in the external world is often the projection of one's own shadow.

Nietzsche says the same thing in an aphorism, with a note of warning: be ready for it. Do not look into the abyss unless you are prepared to recognize yourself there.

VII. Who is the Übermensch?

This is where Nietzsche is most often misunderstood.

The *Übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) is not a blond beast carrying a machine gun. It is not the Nazi ideal. Nietzsche was furious at his sister's early attempts to attribute antisemitism to him; the Nazis used him after his death and mental collapse.

The Übermensch is a person who has followed their own abyss to the end, looked at their dark sides without running away, and integrated them.

What does “integrated” mean? Not “given them free rein.” This matters. Nietzsche never says: “Kill, rape, rob — you have a dark side, after all.” He says: “Know your dark side. Know that you are capable of killing, violence, robbery. And precisely because you know, choose not to do it. Do not merely refrain because you are incapable.”

An incapable person is not a moral person, only a powerless one. Holiness based on powerlessness is not holiness. It is disability.

Holiness, for Nietzsche, is strength that knows itself and chooses not to destroy. It is a rider who knows the power of the horse and keeps it bridled, not because the horse is weak but because the rider has command.

This is very close to “shadow work” in contemporary analytical psychology. Jung says the same thing: integrating the shadow does not mean no longer having one. It means knowing it, living with it, and exercising agency because it has been recognized.

VIII. Why it still frightens us

Nietzsche frightens the ordinary reader with one particular gesture: he refuses to reassure.

Kant ultimately offers comfort: moral law is within you; go and fulfill it. Hegel offers comfort: history moves toward something better. Marx offers comfort: social contradictions will be resolved in communism. Even Freud's psychoanalysis offers comfort: undergo a course of therapy and the symptom will be removed.

Nietzsche offers none. He says: you contain hell. Nobody will remove it. No god will help you — God does not exist, and we have killed him. No morality will save you — morality grew from ressentiment. No revolution will make you different — after the revolution you will be the same you, just carrying a different flag.

What then? Then, *amor fati*: love of fate. You do not choose what is in you. But you can choose what to do with it. Acknowledge it. Use it. Turn it into creation, movement, action. Become who you are.

“Werde, der du bist” — “Become who you are” — was a phrase Nietzsche liked to repeat. It sounds like a truism, but it is not. It means: do not try to become someone different, better, more proper. Follow who you already are all the way through, and discover something there that will surpass your present form.

IX. What Nietzsche saw in himself

A biographical detail seems to bring everything together.

In Turin in 1889, Nietzsche embraced a horse being beaten by a coachman, burst into tears, and never emerged from that state. He spent the final eleven years of his life in madness. At first he tried to write; later he stopped recognizing people. He died in 1900, on the threshold of the twentieth century.

What happened? Medical diagnoses differ. Syphilis? A brain tumor? Bipolar disorder in its final phase? Most likely something bodily, together with psychological exhaustion from a decade of working at the limit.

But Jung offered another reading. Nietzsche looked into his own abyss as no other nineteenth-century philosopher had. He looked for a long time. Too long. The abyss looked back into him and took him away.

Jung saw a warning for himself in this. After separating from Freud, he went through several years of what he called the “confrontation with the unconscious,” 1913–1917. He wrote, drew, and spoke with figures emerging from his own depths. He nearly lost his mind. He survived. This work is described in his *Red Book*, published only in 2009.

Jung, then, did what Nietzsche did not manage: pass through the abyss and return. Not through greater strength, but through method. Jung worked systematically: he wrote down every conversation with the shadow, gave it names, form, context. He made it an object. Nietzsche went on without that, with only a pen and the force of thought. It was too much.

Perhaps the lesson is this: work with the shadow is serious and requires support. Not necessarily religious. Not necessarily psychoanalytic. But some kind. Otherwise the abyss wins.

X. The revaluation of values

The final thing to understand about Nietzsche is his project of the “revaluation of all values,” *Umwertung aller Werte* (Wikipedia: Transvaluation of values).

Nietzsche planned a four-volume work under this title. He completed the first part, *The Antichrist*. The rest remained in drafts.

The idea was not simply to criticize existing values but to overturn them. To say: what you called “good” is weakness hiding behind morality. What you called “evil” is strength that refused to hide. Exchange their places.

This is a provocation, of course. Nietzsche was not literally urging us to regard cruelty as good. He was urging us to examine what we had judged and ask why we judged it that way. Perhaps your “good” is fear. Perhaps your “evil” is what you want but do not dare pursue. What, then, are you actually judging?

Anyone wishing to meet their shadow needs to ask this question. Not “How can I become better?” but “What does better mean, and why do I regard this particular thing as better?” When honest answers begin, something strange emerges. Much of what we consider “good” is simply comfort. Much of what we consider “evil” is simply fear.

This does not mean abandoning morality. It means knowing what it rests on, and knowing what exists within you before and beneath it.

XI. The thread running through the series

In the previous article, we spoke of the “devil” as a religious name for the shadow. Religious traditions gave the shadow a character, a form, a ritual. That was useful. It worked for thousands of years.

Nietzsche is the moment when the shadow loses its religious name. There is no devil. No demon. No sin in the religious sense. Yet the shadow remains. Now it is simply yours. Without intermediaries. Without an alibi.

This is a new situation. Entirely new. Barely beginning to be grasped. Nobody knew how to live with it, and many who tried broke down.

The next article concerns another approach to the same shadow: neither individual, as with Nietzsche, nor theological, as in religion, but mythical. It concerns a monster living in its own palace and the thread along which a hero approached it.

XII. What remains

Not everyone should follow Nietzsche's path. It demands rare courage and rare patience, and without preparation it is dangerous.

But anyone who wants to live honestly eventually encounters the same thing: their own abyss. What is in them and what they are ashamed of. Their envy, rage, lust, greed. The person they would ordinarily look upon with condemnation — and who, in some sense, they themselves are.

At that moment there are three choices.

The first is to turn away. Say “that is not me.” Hide it again. This choice works for a few years. Then the abyss returns, usually at the least convenient moment.

The second is to fall in. Say “this is who I am,” surrender, and stop resisting. This is the path of decadence, destruction, sometimes literal death.

The third is to see without turning away, but also without drowning. Know that the abyss is yours. Live with that knowledge. Do not let it act in your place, but do not deny that it exists.

The third path is what Nietzsche tried to describe through the Übermensch, Jung through individuation, mystics through inner work, and psychotherapists through integration. Different words. The same undertaking.

Someone who looks long into the abyss does not necessarily become the abyss — but only if they look consciously and can also look away.

Perhaps this is all of Nietzsche. Not “kill the weak one within you” — that is a poor reading. Rather, “recognize the dark one within you, so there is someone there to decide what to do with it.”

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