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NIETZSCHE ON ENVY

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A recent newspaper story suggests a significant change in the attitude of some baseball fans. While the phenomenon of harassment of players from the stands is not new, there seems to be a new spirit behind the hurling of bottles and other dangerous debris. Whereas such attacks were once motivated by scorn for poor performance or by a violent enthusiasm for the opposing team, spectators are now also apparently moved by envy. They are, according to a number of sportswriters, jealous and resentful of the high salaries and prestige of professional ballplayers. No doubt envy is an ancient phenomenon, but it is not one much discussed in recent moral philosophy. Both the neglect and the signs that it is becoming an increasingly large problem of personal and social life (I'll later be adding more to what might be taken to be the merely idiosyncratic behavior of sports fans) suggest the need for an analysis of its motives, dynamics and possible antidotes. Nietzsche seems to be one of the few modern thinkers who have devoted much attention to envy after the scholastics' attempt at an encyclopedic and systematic account of the virtues and vices.[1] Nietzsche's concern with the subject is much more pervasive than is suggested by the scanty references to *Neid* and its derivatives in Schlechta's index; moreover, his analysis must be distinguished from the treatment of the allied concept of *ressentiment* which has generated much attention. (For example, envy is discussed at least fourteen times in *Human, All-Too-Human,* appropriately enough.)[2]

It is necessary to distinguish envy from some similar attitudes with which it is often confused. To describe envy as a disturbance or distress caused by the good fortune of another would not be sufficiently precise. One might be disturbed at another's success and so propelled into an attempt to emulate or surpass the other's achievement, as a young runner might set as a standard for himself the records of a champion. This is the distinction, familiar to Aristotle, between envy and emulation or ambition. Envy must also be distinguished from jealousy. The jealous person resents the achievement of another because he believes that he deserves (or equally deserves) the reward or recognition in question. I am jealous of you for having obtained a job for which I believe that I have equal or better qualifications or I am jealous that you have received more applause than I when my performance in the play was equally good.[3] Envy exists when I simply resent your good fortune, your achievement or your recognition *as such,* without any thought that it is properly mine or that I might, with

effort, become worthy of the same. This is the emotion which is close to Nietzsche's *ressentiment*; it is a strictly re-active attitude which finds another's good as such to be despicable or disgusting. In John Rawls's formulation, to which Nietzsche would subscribe, "we may think of envy as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages."[4]

In order to understand what Nietzsche thinks about envy or, for that matter, about any other significant topic it is necessary to see how the concept is exhibited and dramatized in his writings. For Nietzsche philosophical analysis is inseparable from the structure, style, and rhetorical context of what is said. I think we can make a first approach to the concept of envy by examining a chapter from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* the most obviously narrative, dramatic and rhetorical of his writings. In the first part there is a section called "Of the Tree on the Mountainside" which may appear somewhat puzzling until it is realized that envy is the crucial notion around which this particular slice of the drama revolves. The form of the chapter is that of a parable or metaphor in which Zarathustra uses the tree as a way of understanding the condition of an envious youth. As Zarathustra says later, "Whenever your spirit wants to speak in parables or metaphors (*Gleichnisse*) pay heed, for that is when your virtue has its origin and beginning."[5]

The chapter begins with Zarathustra's noticing that a young man has been avoiding him. This is rather unusual behavior even in the somewhat unclear social world which we surmise in this book. Zarathustra has disciples and enemies here; he has those who would give him advice (the prophet and the old woman who makes the notorious remark about the whip); and no doubt there are those who are indifferent to him. Why should anyone deliberately avoid Zarathustra? Zarathustra himself throws some light on this question in his first speech. The situation of that speech is that by wandering through the mountains, he has come across the young man in question leaning against a tree and gazing wearily into the valley. Grasping the tree Zarathustra begins his parable:

> "If I wanted to shake this tree with my hands I should be unable to do it.
> "But the wind, which we cannot see, torments it and bends it where it wishes. It is invisible hands that torment and bend us the worst."[6]

The tree is moved by that which is not visible or tangible. Like natural motion, social and psychological motion (emotion) need not be a response to pushes and pulls which are obviously and grossly present. Envy is a paradigmatic case of such emotional action at a distance. Whereas love, hate, and friendship presuppose some more or less regular contact with the one for whom the emotion is felt, envy may thrive on absence. It is quite possible to envy those with whom I have little contact, because they are celebrated for their wealth, their achievements or their power. (Of course I may also envy those with whom I associate more directly.) There is something disturbing about the presence of the envied person and so the envier may seek to avoid a presence which would

remind him of his distress at not having the thing that he lacks or at not being the person who he is not. Nevertheless the *imagined* superiority of the envied person will "torment and bend us the worst" for imagination will dwell on and exaggerate the properties of the envied figure. Envy can become self-reinforcing, for his reluctance to confront the actual figure will lead the envious one to further exaggeration and further avoidance behavior. Elsewhere Nietzsche says:

> Ordinary envy is wont to cackle when the envied hen has laid an egg, thereby relieving itself and becoming milder. But there is a yet deeper envy that in such a case becomes dead silent, desiring that every mouth should be sealed and always more and more angry because this desire is not gratified. Silent envy grows in silence.[7]

By speaking to the youth Zarathustra aims at breaking this downward spiral of silent envy.

The youth confirms the analysis: "I hear Zarathustra and I was just thinking of him," he replies, standing up in confusion. That is, he confirms both Zarathustra's belief that his avoidance was the product of obsession rather than indifference and the principle of emotional action at a distance, for it seems to him that his thoughts have somehow led to Zarathustra's appearance. With so much established, Zarathustra's parable takes another turn. After seeking to calm the youth's alarm he says:

> "Now it is with men as with this tree.
> "The more it wants to rise into the heights and the light, the more determinedly do its roots strive earthward, downwards, into the darkness, into the depths—into evil."

There are several forms of envy and a number of allied attitudes. Of the latter, the one which receives the most extensive treatment in Nietzsche's work is the *ressentiment* of the weak and ill-favored against those who are strong and well turned out. This is a moral stance which *begins* with a sense of antithetical values. Nietzsche calls these "good and evil" in *The Genealogy of Morals* to distinguish the attitude from the self-affirming attitude of the "good" for whom the "bad" is merely a secondary concept. The envy described here is not of that sort. Rather it is one which begins by wanting to "rise into the heights and the light"; that is, its first movement is an aspiration toward a goal. But there is a further distinction between envy and *ressentiment.* As a moral attitude *ressentiment* does, although reactively, believe itself to be *good,* as the lambs that Nietzsche imagines in *The Genealogy of Morals* take themselves to be the moral antithesis of the evil birds or prey. Envy, on the contrary, may be relatively devoid of rationalization and find itself forced, despite itself, into what it regards as evil. " 'Yes, into evil!' cried the young man. 'How is it possible you can uncover my soul?' " Sartre guesses that black masses and similar phenomena may be conscious expressions of envy against God or the good, and thus consciously evil. In this case the goal has been exemplified by Zarathustra. But even a keen and noble aspiration may be frustrated and turn toward "the depths—into evil." The particular form of evil here is that which is contained in

the young man's explicit confession: "Behold, what have I been since you appeared among us? It is *envy* of you which has destroyed me!" Frustrated aspirations have a way of turning *against* those who have exemplified success in the pursuit in question.

The evil of envy is that it wishes harm to the envied one even at the expense of the envier; it is willing to sacrifice its own good so as not to be confronted with the good of the other. The extreme case would be the murders cited by the sociologist Helmut Schoeck in his book on envy.[8] In many cases the envious murderers were scarcely acquainted with their victims, in any ordinary social sense of acquaintance. Here the envious one gives up his or her own freedom, a great good, simply for the sake of eliminating the rival or obstacle.[9] This is evil in the deepest sense, for it is not simply a choice of a perverse or narrow good to the exclusion of a more genuine or inclusive one, but the destruction or diminution of the goods in the situation without the achievement of any alternative goods. Now Zarathustra's darkest saying about such envy is his suggestion that this is a law of human life: "Now it is with men as with this tree."[10] Taken together with the *ressentiment* of those who have no original aspirations, envy would appear to be not an occasional and unusual vice but the lot of almost all human beings. Now it may be possible to minimize certain kinds of envy in a system of political and economic justice like the one proposed by John Rawls, in which every such advantage of the more highly favored must be justified by its increasing the political and economic goods of the less favored members of the society. Even here there are limits, however; if half a society could become millionaires while the other half have their incomes increased by one dollar a year, it seems very likely that envy would be increased rather than diminished. In any case the causes of envy lie not only in the distribution of political and economic goods but in the frustration of noble aspirations or in an original feeling of worthlessness. Rawls suggests, without much empirical evidence, that the latter can itself be minimized by a just system of social arrangements. The former, involving such desires as those for athletic or romantic or scientific success, has no obvious antidote.

Still the question remains why such a pattern of response should be considered typical rather than a deplorable and infrequent aberration. Zarathustra's fullest answer to this question is in the chapter "On Redemption." There all revenge is said to be "the will's antipathy toward time and time's 'It was.' " The ontological source of revenge (*Rache*), which I take to be inclusive of both envy and *ressentiment,* is our apparent impotence in regard to the brute actuality of the past. However successful the will may be in overcoming a variety of obstacles the sheer givenness of the past and our inability to change it leads to the will's turning rancorously against some substitute (which might be itself). Envy and *ressentiment* are often and ordinarily described as "dwelling on the past." To be envious is to remain fixated on real or imaginary slights, humiliations, or contrasts of status which have already occurred. When envy rationalizes itself as punishment it preaches that everything which passes away deserves to pass away; here the application is to envy's joy in the destruction or spoliation of the one who is envied.

Let us now return to Nietzsche's text. Before he directly confesses his envy to Zarathustra, the young man describes his experience with others:

> "Since I wanted to rise into the heights I have no longer trusted myself and no one trusts me anymore. . . .
>
> When I am aloft, I always find myself alone. No one speaks to me, the frost of solitude makes me tremble. . . .
>
> My contempt and my desire increase together; the higher I climb, the more do I despise him who climbs. . . .
>
> How ashamed I am of my climbing and stumbling! How I scorn my violent panting! How I hate the man who can fly! How weary I am in the heights!"

In part this outburst confirms the analysis given of the transformation of frustrated aspiration into the hatred of success. It is also a reply to Zarathustra's own self-congratulation in the immediately preceding chapter "On Reading and Writing" where he rejoices in his own agile climbing and flying. Yet it also introduces the theme of the social pervasiveness of envy. The youth is not only himself envious of Zarathustra but has experienced the envy of others. In the world of envy the distinction between enviers and envied ones is functional and relative to specific contexts and situations. He who envies another (Zarathustra is envied in this case) is himself envied by others, who themselves may be envied. When we realize that typically there is no unique scale of attainment along which success or failure can be measured, we see that in most social situations everyone may be involved in envy. That is, I may be envied for my money, but envy others their good looks, their health or any number of things. An extreme case of such pervasive envy on a number of scales is reported by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, on the basis of his observation of life in a Mexican peasant village:

> The man who speaks little, keeps his affairs to himself, and maintains some distance between himself and others has less chance of creating enemies or of being criticized or envied. A man does not generally discuss his plans to buy or sell or take a trip. A woman does not customarily tell a neighbor or even a relative that she is going to have a baby or make a new dress or prepare something special for dinner. . . . There is greater readiness to commiserate in another's misfortune than to take joy in his success, resulting in a more widespread sharing of bad news than good. There is an almost secretive attitude toward good fortune and boasting is at a minimum. People . . . do not ordinarily advise each other where a good purchase or sale is to be made, how an animal can be cured, or in what ways a crop can be improved.[11]

In primitive societies and to a certain extent in our own such pervasive envy is thought of as embodied in "the evil eye" or envious glance; many adages advise of the importance of shielding any good luck from the evil eye. Elsewhere Nietzsche says, "A true fox not only calls sour the grapes he cannot reach, but also those he has reached and snatched from the grasp of others."[12] And he

recognizes the almost unlimited forms of envy in this aphorism: "He is envious; let us hope that he will not have children, for he would envy them because he cannot be a child anymore."[13] In Zarathustra's final reply to the youth he tells him that because he still feels himself noble the others dislike him and *"böse Blicken senden"*—"give him the evil eye." (Interestingly Hollingdale and Kaufmann both miss the colloquial force of this expression in their translations; both have Zarathustra speak of casting or sending "evil glances" which neglects the systematic structure of beliefs of which "the evil eye" is a symptom).

Now we may think of societies with a pervasive belief in "the evil eye" as quite different from our own or at least, as Rawls supposes, different from the society which would be in accordance with our own deepest principles of justice. Two factors, however, suggest that our sense of this difference may be exaggerated. One is the epochal event of the death of God; the other is the tendency in a time of shrinking resources and lower economic growth to adopt a steady-state, zero-sum model of society according to which anyone's gain must be someone else's loss. For Nietzsche these two factors can be systematically interrelated through the concept of "the last man"; but let us look at them separately for the time being.

Traditional religious belief may be interpreted as a device for minimizing envy. In so-called primitive societies there is often an enormous hostility toward those who are different and a consequent fear of oneself being different from others. According to René Girard, one typical way of controlling the universal violence which might result from such sensed differences is the ritual of scapegoating, that is of killing, devouring, or punishing a specific person (or animal substitute) which can be held to be significantly different from all the rest of the society.[14] In its classical form scapegoating takes the form of periodically executing the sacred being whose kingship makes him uncannily distinct from all of his subjects. In a more general way the concept of a transcendent God performs much the same social function. By being absolutely superior to all human beings, God is that which suggests our fundamental brotherhood of solidarity. Such attitudes are typically reinforced by the idea of a divine justice before which we are all fundamentally equal. In the absence of such transcendent contrast, however, there are fewer obstacles to focussing on the many differences between us. Accordingly the death of God leaves men with only each other to look at and with a correspondingly accentuated sense of their differences. In his talk "Of the Higher Man," Zarathustra says " 'You Higher Men'—thus the mob blink—'there are no Higher Men, we are all equal, man is but man, before God—we are all equal!' . . . But now this God has died." (*Z*, 297)

The belief in transcendent figures as a way of guaranteeing the equality of a group, and therefore of warding off envy, has many extensions. Nietzsche suggests that the cult of genius in the arts is a device for avoiding envy, for example: "the cult of genius fosters our vanity, our self-love, for it is only when

we think of it as very far removed from us, as a miracle, that it does not wound us."[15] It may be that the constant accessibility to the lives of actors and athletes through the mass media has helped to destroy their aura of separateness and has led to growth of envy like the one mentioned earlier in the changed behavior of baseball fans.

Our own age is experiencing the tendency toward a steady-state society which may, despite a higher degree of affluence, come to bear some significant structural analogies to the peasant village described by Lewis. To a large degree this tendency is certainly due to shrinking resources and burgeoning population; but might it not also be a form of society which is likely to appeal to "the last man" and in which "the last man" is likely to flourish?

> "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" thus asks the last man and blinks.
>
> The earth has become small, and upon it hops the last man, who makes everthing small . . . .
>
> Nobody grows rich or poor anymore: both are too much of a burden . . . .
>
> No herdsman and one herd. Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same: whoever thinks otherwise goes voluntarily into the madhouse.

"The last man" makes everything small because he has no sense of nobility; a society of "last men" will aim at equalizing the condition of all and of giving envy a rational form. Once envy has been rationalized and institutionalized the one who thinks or wills differently will no longer be subjected to scapegoating or ostracism. It will be obvious that he does not fit into the levelled society and so will voluntarily enter the madhouse. Here we might think of the somewhat similar picture of the carceral society developed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault traces the change in the practice of punishment from the public ritual execution or degradation (with many of the features of religious scapegoating) to the formation of the prison as a total institution designed to regularize and render predictable the behavior of its inmates; that is, to suppress all differences. Such institutions, significantly enough, are projected in an extreme form in Jeremy Bentham's vision of the Panopticon, a building designed both for total surveillance of its inmates and to create among the inmates the feeling of being under total surveillance.[16] I think we ought to regard Foucault's further suggestion that the Panopticon is the paradigmatic social institution of our society not so much as a literal claim, but rather as a warning similar to Zarathustra's vision of the last man. It shows us what life is like when one attempts to enforce Bentham's principle that each is to count for one and no more than one.

In the parable from which I have been taking increasingly lengthy excursions the youth shows some capacity to be saved from the last extremity of envy. After he breaks down in tears following his confession, Zarathustra throws his arm around him and reminds the youth that he still "longs for the open heights" and that his "soul thirsts for the stars." To some extent he takes

part in what Zarathustra will call, a few chapters later, radiant virtue (*die schenckende Tugend*). Radiant virtue is the inverse of envy; it is the virtue which corresponds to that vice. Whereas envy pulls into itself every cause for its own hostility and dwells on these to exaggeration, the person of radiant virtue "is insatiable in wanting to give." That person is an examplar, a tower of strength. In today's language we talk of stars (of film, or in other pursuits that are publically known) and Zarathustra compares the figure of radiant virtue to the inexhaustible radiance of the sun. Following this analogy the envious man is a black hole, a star which has collapsed upon itself. He and it become evident to us only through their destructive behavior. The envious man *avoids* contact but still acts at a distance by means of the evil eye. (Zarathustra says to the youth that "Better than your words, your eye tells me all your peril.") The youth is torn between envy and radiant virtue. Zarathustra describes this conflict in terms of the metaphor of the prison; "you are still a prisoner who is plotting his freedom," he says. The youth has explained already how he is trapped in the prison formed by the distrust (or evil eye) of the others and his own distrust of himself. Even the free man of the spirit must purify himself, Zarathustra says, for much of the *prison* remains within him and his *eye* must become pure. I think that with Bentham's Panopticon and Foucault's carceral society in mind we can read this advice to the youth as more than a simple injunction to noble aspiration. It also contains an analysis of the *site* of his condition—the prison-house of envy—and of the chief instrument and symptom of that condition—the eye, which can be either a radiant orb or the instrument of invidious calculation and comparison.

But how can the youth, or any of us, purify his eye? At this point Zarathustra's advice may seem distressingly vague. The problem, he is suggesting, is not so much that of escape but of a radical change in which one would no longer be on the lookout for the guards and other prisoners in the prison-house of envy. But such a change, or rather the description of what such a change would be like, will require the teachings of the will to power and the eternal recurrence which can ground and enable the metaphorical accounts of the virtues and vices which Zarathustra is giving in this early part of the book. Perhaps the best that can be done rhetorically is to depict, as Zarathustra does in a final warning, the final terms in the involuted spiral on which the envious man is launched. The noble men who lose their highest hopes, he says, become slanderers of all hope. This is a pattern which has already become familiar in our analysis. But here it is advanced as a terrible possibility for the youth to whom Zarathustra speaks, not as a general but rather impersonal point about human nature. "Do not reject the hero in your soul!" may be somewhat trite—Walter Kaufmann calls it "advice for adolescents"—but it may also be the appropriate thing to say.

Nietzsche sometimes praises envy, as in the essay on "Homer's Contest." Such praise of envy seems almost always to resolve itself into a celebration of

the agonistic spirit, which Nietzsche contrasts with the atomized life of modern men. The envy which is considered here is modern envy of the silent variety. Nietzsche seems to imply that the stirrings of envy can be expressed through speech and action or that such expression can be restrained, with the consequence that "silent envy grows in silence." In his advice "On War and Warriors" Zarathustra says: "I know the hatred and envy of your hearts. You are not great enough not to know hatred and envy. So be great enough not to be ashamed of them!" (Z 73-74) Envy is indeed one of the seven deadly sins and one which it is extremely difficult to admit to either oneself or to others. One typically denies one's own envy by complimenting the envied one or, as in the section we have just looked at, one keeps one's distance in the hope that the issue will not arise. If envy is indeed a human all too human emotion, we might all do better to be less ashamed that *we* feel it.

1 Some philosophical discussions of envy in the modern period are Hegel's disscussion of "The Animal Kingdom of the Spirit" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Kierkegaard's *The Two Ages* (translated as *The Present Age*).

2 Part One: aphorisms 157, 162, 361, 503, 559; Part Two, I: 53, 304, 310, 334, 377, 383; Part Two, II: 27, 29, 30, 244. Nietzsche is drawing to some extent on the writings of the French moralists, notably La Rochefoucauld, who also discuss envy extensively. The topic is treated extensively throughout Nietzsche's writing.

3 Nietzsche makes such distinctions in *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part Two, II (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*): 29. John Rawls draws the same distinctions in *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 533.

4 Rawls, p. 532.

5 "On Radiant Virtue" (*Von der schenkenden Tugend*). Metaphorical discourse is not the only form of poetic-philosophical language in Zarathustra. For an attempt to sort out the various tropes or figures in this work see Gary Shapiro, "The Rhetoric of Nietzsche's Zarathustra," in *Philosophical Style*, Berel Lang, ed., Chicago, Nelson-Hall, 1980, pp. 347-385.

6 I have generally followed Hollingdale's translation, occasionally cited as Z.

7 *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part Two, I (*Mixed Opinions and Maxims*) 53.

8 Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*, Michael Glenny and Betty Ross trs., New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, pp. 106-110.

9 For some prudential advice on how to avoid envy by hiding one's advantages and advertising one's misfortunes, see *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part Two, I: 304, 310, 334.

10 I take this to be the sense of *Human, All-Too-Human*, One, 503: "*Envy and Jealousy.*—Envy and jealousy are the pudenda *Schamteile* of the human soul. The comparison may perhaps be carried further." That is, these attitudes not only are shameful but are in fact generative; they help the soul to reproduce itself by instilling similar attitudes in others.

11 Cited by Shoeck, pp. 50-51. For a general account of the anthropological literature on envy see George M. Foster, "The Anatomy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behavior," *Current Anthropology,* XIII 1972, pp. 165-202. I do not mean to suggest that envy is limited to peasant societies or to the lower economic strata; one can find abundant evidence of it in mainly elite white male institutions such as the university.

12 *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part Two, II: 244 ("The Fox of Foxes").

13 *The Gay Science,* 207.

14 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* Patrick Gregory, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

15 *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part One, 162.

16 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* Alan Sheridan tr., New York, Vintage Books, 1979.