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L'être humain

Final dissertation
Platonic dialogue between Nietzsche & Hume
Presented to
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Part 1 – Exposing the problematic

Friedrich Nietzsche and David Hume are both resurrected from their tombs and are informed of every major event that has taken place since their respective deaths up until the present day, in the 21st century. They are introduced to each other and have a debate from their respective points of view.

NIETZSCHE: It appears that ever since my passing, my writings have unsurprisingly gained much relevancy. The rate at which Western society has developed technologically and socially over the past century is unparalleled in history. Development, in turn, creates new problems for which humanity finds a solution. This leads to the question: what phenomenon of human nature can lead to the biggest decadence?

Man is more than ever given the chance to relax. As such, the average citizen has more opportunity than ever to sit, do nothing and distract himself from life's challenges as life passes, which leads to guilt. This is the guilt of existence: rather than recognizing the self-destructive behavior that we exhibit and changing it, we blame our suffering on existence itself. This bad conscience is what will inherently lead to the bigger decadence of humanity.

HUME: This guilt stems from the individual's inherent desire to be perceived as desirable by others. As a result, when an individual fails to be given the appreciation and pleasant emotions he so desires, he develops humility. That humility, in turn, can degenerate into anger and hatred towards the ones who have mistreated us. The excess of anger and hatred is arguably more problematic than a bad conscience.

Part 2 – Developing the debate

NIETZSCHE: I disagree. Humans are conditioned since birth to live under constructs and notions pre-conceived by society. The more that a person progresses in life, the more that person loses touch with their identity and is determined instead by the social relationships that they develop, the media that they consume, and the institutions that they frequent.

For example, the more we grow up, the more we lose touch with the creativity and curiosity of life that characterizes childhood. This is due to authority figures in our lives convincing us to assimilate to a forced lifestyle. You were never truly yourself from the beginning. You were rather a camel

who was forced to transport a heavy load across a desert: you lived a lifestyle that was imposed on you. This either leads to indifference and passive suffering or rejection and active suffering.

HUME: While I agree with your concept of social conditioning, I cannot agree with your concept of “personal identity.” As human beings, we do not have an inherent “self.” Rather, the idea of our “self” is actually our own impression of the characteristics that define us, and those characteristics are not a constant and perpetual object – people change and they die. Only the idea remains, which will in turn be forgotten once that person’s legacy will be forgotten. The ideas that we generate in our consciousness are derived from the impressions that we make upon our sensations. Whenever we are struck with emotion from an occurrence, we remember that emotion and base our future reasoning upon it. As a result, we internalize our emotions to reactivate them at a later period in time.

To present a concrete example, someone performs a generous act in your favour. In turn, you deduce a feeling of pleasure, joy, and love. Because your love for that person is accentuated, you develop a feeling of gratitude towards that person. As such, your logical thinking is affected by the sensations that you perceive. Emotions are what constitute our character, as they are programmed into us. They are what allow our rationality to mold itself and to develop our logical reasoning.

To return to my explanation of personal identity or lack thereof, humans are mortal beings capable of generating ideas. If those ideas are derived from our impressions, then they are subject to change, as their interpretations can change over time. For example, we will assume that a tree that we walk by daily is the same tree because of the identity that we have given it. However, it is not the same tree – some of its leaves have been swept away by the wind, a branch has been ripped off, and so on. As such, individuals cannot hate themselves because they comprise of their impressions cobbled together, and those impressions do not form together to create a stable “self.” That “identity” is created in our imagination.

NIETZSCHE: Emotions are certainly primordial to how individuals situate themselves in the world, as they can evaluate the value of those emotions, and it is certain that interpretations of ideas are what lead us to find the cause and deduce an effect. But, human life is a life of expectations and deception. Consequently, we are subjected to live in an endless void without

inherent meaning if we do not reflect on what our desires truly are. Furthermore, we must not reject our animalistic impulses, as they are what drive us to the very meaning we give to life – rejecting impulses would mean rejecting life itself because you reject the visceral self-interests that make you human. Bad conscience characterizes itself by the guilt of being human.

Part 3 – Resolving the debate

HUME: If bad conscience seeks to renounce human nature by way of defeatism and overwhelming guilt, then excessive anger and hatred assume that as well. Anger and hatred, if left unchecked, lead to blind rage, and blind rage leads to the suffering of others and oneself. A society scarred by hatred is apparent – violence and cruelty are rampant, whereas a society full of bad conscience does certainly decay, but it does so more slowly.

NIETZSCHE: You are wrong. Bad conscience is arguably the cause of a bigger decadence because an individual's self-perception can also lack self-awareness. One can realize and pinpoint their excessive anger and hatred, but it is inherently more difficult to realize when you reject life because the results are not immediate. Excessive anger and hatred greatly distort your capacity to act rationally, but existential guilt leads to that as well.

The guilt stems from individuals' failure to have developed their own personal identity. That failure leads to self-hatred. Case in point, reluctantly pursuing higher studies does not seem wrong at a glance, but it truly appears destructive when you are presented with all of the opportunities that were denied because of a refusal to pursue a satisfactory goal. Self-loathing and the rejection of life are the more important factors leading to decadence because it is simpler to regulate our emotions towards others than towards ourselves.

An excess of anger and hatred leads to negative emotions being amplified. Existential guilt leads to the absence of life, as you live a hollow "life" where you worry about existing.

HUME: I cannot disagree.

Part 4 – Opening the reflection

HUME: What is the solution that you present to the problem, then?

NIETZSCHE: It is quite simple. We can combat bad conscience by accepting life and by pursuing passion, art, self-ownership, and struggle. What makes humanity remarkable is our ability to give meaning to the meaningless.

HUME: If that is the case, then humanity lives in a constant paradox of meaninglessness. The meaning that we attribute to life can be meaningless in and of itself.

NIETZSCHE: Somewhat. It bases itself on an individual's acceptance of existence.

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