

Temptation in the wilderness versus the will to power

In this address I will contrast two different ways of assessing what is worthwhile as we engage with one another in society. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche promoted one assessment; the other is embedded in the narrative of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). We will see, I think, that Nietzsche's assessment has, to some extent, permeated twenty first century culture. We will also see that the narrative of Jesus' temptation declares Nietzsche's narrative to be suspect.

At the centre of Nietzsche's assessment of how human beings should live was his assertion that God was 'dead'. This was not a claim that God had actually died - whatever that could mean. What Nietzsche meant was that the Christian God had become unworthy of belief. Another author, Terry Eagleton, says that the 'death of God' happens when people are no longer interested in, or agitated by, religion. When the notion of the 'death' of God is defined in this way I think we can see that God is pretty much moribund in our culture, and that this is true even though many people at census time may still claim to be aligned to a religion.

According to Nietzsche what results from the death of God is nihilism. Nihilism is the feeling that all happens is, finally, meaningless and in vain. If this is the case then there are no moral truths and no moral knowledge. This is the case because, according to Nietzsche, believe in God involved a belief that human life had a purpose, and that this purpose enabled people to discern what was good and the way they should act. But when this understanding of life falls into disrepute everything becomes meaningless.

What does Nietzsche say is to be done in the face of nihilism? If God has 'died' then there is only one place to which we can turn to assess how to live life. That place is nature, and the principle that is dominant in nature, according to Nietzsche, is the will to power. Life, he writes, is "essentially appropriation, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms.....(BGE 259). Acting in this way is good because it is an expression of natural life. It is good because the natural is good. Nietzsche's notion of the will to power as being what is

left for human beings after the ‘death’ of God takes up the evolutionary mechanism of survival of the fittest.

Nietzsche held that only the strongest in human society would have the stomach to live by willing power over the weak. Those who can do this, he claimed, are the noble and aristocratic individuals. Those who do not have the strength and nobility to exercise the will to power, are those, Nietzsche claimed, who can only cling to slave morality. Christianity is for Nietzsche the prime exemplar of slave morality. To conclude our presentation of Nietzsche we might advance the opinion that in the current culture the will to power is something that is practised and valued, probably unreflectively, by many individuals and institutions.

The narrative about Jesus’ time in the wilderness has a number of themes running through it. The main theme is about the kind of messiahship that he was to pursue. The story assumes from the beginning that Jesus, as the incarnate reality of God, possesses power. The drama that unfolds in the narrative is about how that power is to be exercised to bring newness to humanity. However because Jesus is also fully a human being the drama advocates a way that human individuals should exercise the power that they may have. In the story the string of natural ideas that Jesus has are characterised as the devil’s voice.

The three temptations boil down to one – to use a spectacular display of force to accomplish the good for human beings. Think of the temptations in this way. The noble and powerful Jesus, standing head and shoulders above the general herd of humanity, shows his superiority by the production of wonders at which the crowds could only gawp. Sure, the unheard of spectacle would apparently be for a good cause; it would be done in the name of God’s higher cause and for the good of the people who will now blindly follow the miracle worker. But the problem is that this would only mimic the actions of powerful regimes throughout history. Give the people food and circuses and they will be docile. Furthermore these wonders would not be the will of God. His will is that the good of humanity is given in through a powerless but persistent love and self-giving. Two possibilities for life clash in the wilderness. The will to self-giving and persistent love versus a naked will to power is what is being decided in the wilderness. The narrative of Jesus in the wilderness

presents humanity with an assessment of how life may be lived, an assessment of what is the good. Is it Nietzsche's will to power or Christ's self-emptying and healing love?