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Friedrich Nietzsche's Glorification of War

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In his writings, Friedrich Nietzsche repeatedly glorifies war. Yet throughout history men and women of good will have been horrified by war and have denounced it with passion. How could one of Europe's most brilliant philosophers say that war is good when most people believe that it is bad? One hypothesis is that Nietzsche uses the word "war" as a metaphor for intellectual and spiritual battles and seems to think that it has nothing to do with real military warfare. This article offers a new hypothesis that claims that Nietzsche's praise of war is simply a manifestation of his mental illness, which has been diagnosed as schizophrenia.

Keywords: Nietzsche, glorification of war, schizophrenia

Introduction

The Second World War killed at least 85 million people. It also destroyed many people's faith in human goodness or in God. After the horrors of the battles and concentration camps of Nazi Germany, many Europeans became pacifists and vowed to prevent any future warfare in Europe. It should therefore come as a surprise to people who look to Nietzsche for wisdom and advice on political and social matters that he actually praised warfare. It is thus incomprehensible that certain leftist intellectuals admire a philosopher who deplored socialism and glorified war.

Nietzsche's Statements about War

The following are Nietzsche's comments about war.[1]

"What is good?... Not at all peace, but war." (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 821)
"One has renounced the great life when one renounces war." (Ibid, p. 759)
"The free man is a warrior." (Ibid, p. 801)
"A man should be educated for war and a woman should be educated for the recreation of warriors. Everything else is stupidity." (Ibid, p. 409)
"You should love peace as a means to new wars. And the short peace more than the long one." (Ibid, p. 194)
"War and courage have done more great things than love of one's neighbour." (Ibid, p. 395)
"A good war hallows any cause." (Ibid, p. 395).

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[1] All the translations from German and French are my own, with the exception of the quotation from *The Dawn of Day*, which was translated by John McFarland Kennedy.

"War" as Metaphor

How should one interpret Nietzsche's statements praising war? It would be generous to him to say that had he lived in the twentieth century and seen the absolute evil released on humanity by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, he would not have glorified war as he did.

One French admirer of Nietzsche, Michel Onfray, claims that Nietzsche "used war in his books as a pure and simple metaphor" (Onfray, 2006, p. 35). However, Onfray offers no proof for what he affirms. He makes an act of faith in Nietzsche, which is most unusual for a philosopher who scorns religion. I believe that it actually does a disservice to Nietzsche and shows a lack of respect for him to think that when he asserts that war is good he does not really mean what he proposes. Onfray would like us to believe that the wars which Nietzsche admires are actually intellectual and spiritual ones, and have nothing to do with soldiers, arms, battles, blood and gore. If this were so, we should be just as sceptical of Nietzsche's praise of war since the psychological warfare that he knew in his own life was abysmally horrible and led to his insanity.

One of the few men whom Nietzsche praises is the deadliest warrior of the nineteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte, who became famous for his real life military battles and not for any intellectual or spiritual warfare. Nietzsche declares: "There are cases in which such a man turns out to be stronger than society: the Corsican Napoleon is the most famous case" (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 806). "One should remember, for example, Napoleon, whose essence surely grew out of his belief in himself and his star and his abundant contempt for people, to create the mighty unity which sets him apart from all modern people" (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 217). Napoleon was the nineteenth century equivalent of Adolf Hitler.

The most forceful example of Nietzsche's love of war came from his own life. In 1870, being a citizen of Switzerland at the time, he chose to serve in the German army as an orderly in Germany's war against France, although in his writings he always criticized Germany and praised France. It were as though he thought that his life would be incomplete if he did not at least once actively participate in a real war. He managed to work for one month at the siege of Metz before he had to resign because of ill health. We must remember that at that time Nietzsche suffered from "terrible, debilitating migraine headaches, seasickness on land—dizziness, nausea, vomiting, anorexia, distaste for food; fevers and big night sweats, which required at least two or three changes of sheets and pyjamas per night; excesses of tiredness sometimes close to complete muscular paralysis; stomach pains; vomiting blood; intestinal cramps; severe constipation; haemorrhoids; serious troubles of vision" (Yalom, 1992, pp. 96-97). It is not impossible that these were psychosomatic illnesses caused by Nietzsche neglecting the fundamental requirements of his misbegotten libido.

Nietzsche's Pugnaciousness Seen as a Symptom of His Mental Illness

If we can take Nietzsche at his word, he actually did want to glorify warfare. This being so, we should use today's criteria for goodness and evil, which are often expressed in terms of mental health and mental illness. Nietzsche's bellicosity was doubtlessly evil and its real origin was his mental illness. He liked wars because he was deranged.

Of course we all know that he spent the last eleven years of his life in confinement due to his mental illness, after his collapse in Turin in 1889. Al Siebert is among those Nietzsche scholars who say that his mental illness was schizophrenia. According to Siebert, Nietzsche's schizophrenia started long before his hospitalization. In a

fascinating article entitled "Similarities between Nietzsche's Übermensch and the Survivor Personality," Siebert classifies Nietzsche as being a typical schizophrenic survivor. He claims that Nietzsche's character Zarathustra manifests features of survivors of schizophrenia and that Nietzsche attributes to Zarathustra his own qualities and his own sufferings. Among the traits of schizophrenic survivors that Siebert finds in Zarathustra (and in Nietzsche) are the following: playful curiosity, laughing, self-actualization, being paradoxical, being synergetic, sensitivity, toughness, and serendipity (Siebert, 1996, p. 4). For example, Nietzsche and Zarathustra, like typical schizophrenic survivors, have a free, independent mind and spirit and want to learn from experience, and enjoy asking questions.

Nietzsche's insanity and his philosophy are intertwined throughout his career as a writer. They were both the cause and the consequence of each other. Who but a madman could write: "There is an inexpressible happiness at the sight of torture" (Nietzsche, 2019, p. 35)? Millions of people watched George Floyd being tortured to death by a policeman in 2020, but it is totally impossible to imagine that anyone found any kind of happiness at the sight of it.

Conclusion

Reading Nietzsche is like reading the Bible. There is much truth, much beauty, much evil and much madness in both. The reader is required to decide for himself which passages he likes, which ones inspire him, with which ones he disagrees, and which ones make him angry and want to protest.

Two of the greatest minds of twentieth century Germany have associated Nietzsche with the Nazi movement. They are Thomas Mann and Martin Heidegger. Mann wrote in 1948: "His Superman (*Übermensch*) is nothing other than the idealization of the fascist leader (*Führer*) and he himself with all his philosophizing was a pacemaker, co-creator and brainstormer of ideas for European and world fascism" (Mann, 1976, p. 358).

The most forceful indictment of Nietzsche is Martin Heidegger's confession that it was while reading Nietzsche that he decided to become a member of the Nazi Party (Beiner, 2018, p. 111). Heidegger calls Nietzsche "the instigator of the politics of force and war" (Heidegger, 1958, p. 127).

It is possible for someone to venerate Nietzsche. It is possible as well to promote leftist ideals. But it is impossible for the same person to do both. Leftists oppose warfare and try to promote social justice, whereas Nietzsche praised war and opposed socialism.

I have always been a pacifist and a socialist. I went into permanent exile in 1968 at the age of twenty-two to protest against the American war in Vietnam. I continue to believe that war and violence are the common enemy of all humanity. Whenever I see any form of glorification of war, I protest. America's senseless, illegal and immoral wars have led to her decline and fall. At least twelve million people have been killed by the American military since the end of the Second World War. A nation that does not respect the sanctity of human life has lost any claim to moral authority that it might have once had and does not deserve to be in a position of world leadership.

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