

Joseph W Kearns

Mr. Walter Sterling, Tutor

Theology/Philosophy Tutorial

25 May 2004

The Importance of Danger in Beyond Good and Evil

In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche bemoans what he considers to be the degeneration of modern man into a democratic animal whose morality affirms equality, pity, and selflessness, which he considers to be the values of a “slave morality”. He issues a call for new philosophers and new Europeans whose values will emphasize independence and command, curiosity and daring. In this call, I was struck by the frequent appearance of the words “danger” or “dangerous,” most often in a context suggesting that danger is desirable, and attraction to danger a virtue. After examining each occurrence of “danger” or its derivatives, I am convinced that Nietzsche considered danger to be a key factor in the development of moralities, and perhaps even the primary spur for the development of his new European.

Danger is referenced at least once in nearly every one of the first 44 sections, and again in nearly every section after Section 195. In general, “dangerous” has a positive connotation. This is evident in the first chapter, in which he sees his new philosophers specializing in “dangerous Maybes”, such as the possibility that, “what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things—maybe even one with them in essence. Maybe!” (Section 2) In a sense, Nietzsche here suggests that his entire project will be the exploration of these “dangerous maybes.” In Section 4, he again associates danger with the

recognition of “untruth as a condition of life--that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way...” At the close of his first chapter, at the end of Section 23, he speaks of the exploration of new and strange ideas using a maritime metaphor, in which our bark has drifted into a sea of “dangerous insights”, and he exhorts us, “All right! Let us clench our teeth! Let us open our eyes and keep our hand on the helm! ...daring to make our voyage there.” In Section 28, in speaking with admiration of Machiavelli’s use of humor in The Prince, he notes that he risks “long, difficult, hard, *dangerous* thoughts...”

But who or what is in danger here? And why is that good?

One of the parties in danger is the independent thinker himself. In Section 29, Nietzsche notes that, “Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong. And whoever attempts it even with the best right but without inner constraint proves that he is probably not only strong, but also daring to the point of recklessness. ...He multiplies a thousand fold the *dangers* which life brings with it...” He separates himself from the common man, and risks losing his way without hope of return to his former state.

Here Nietzsche begins to differentiate dangers. There is one type of danger to the independent thinker, and perhaps another to the common man. What is dangerous for one may be salutary to the other. “What serves the higher type of men as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type.” (Section 30) Some books that “call the bravest to their courage” are “dangerous and lead to crumbling” for lower souls. In these cases, the same situation or stimulus will have different effects depending on the character of the persons involved. Yet even for the “higher

souls”, the danger does not cease to be danger. Though it may call out courage, it may also destroy if the person is insufficiently strong.

Truth itself may be dangerous. “Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree.” (Section 39) Being completely known by others, or even knowing oneself utterly, is dangerous, and therefore the more profound people take on masks to avoid the danger of exposure. (Section 40). It is the danger presented by truth that makes being a philosopher a dangerous undertaking. Nietzsche calls the new philosophers “attempters”, a name which, he says, is “not free of danger.”

For these new philosophers, for the new Europeans which Nietzsche desires to see, such dangers are welcomed because they provide a type of test of character, a test whether one is “destined for independence and command”, his highest virtues. (Section 41) False “free spirits” instead seek the absence of danger. They seek the “universal green-pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort...” (Section 44) The truly new philosophers, among which Nietzsche counts himself, recognize that mankind has grown to his present height precisely because of pressures and danger, “that to this end the dangerousness of his situation must first grow to the point of enormity...that hardness, forcefulness, slavery, danger...serves the enhancement of the species ‘man’.”

In the preceding examples, danger was seen as a primarily positive influence, at least upon men of the higher sort. But Nietzsche does discuss at some length a danger of a negative sort, namely the danger the Jewish and Christian religions pose to mankind as a whole. In Section 62, he elaborates upon the “uncanny dangerousness” presented when such religions “want to be ultimate ends and not means

among other means.” These religions have tended to the corruption of society by their siding with the weak and suffering, by elevating suffering, and by “preserving too much of what ought to perish.” Their teachings have led to a leveling of humanity, a loss of distinction between high and low, ruler and ruled, master and slave. They have bred a European who is “a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, and mediocre.”

Nietzsche calls the morality of the Jews and especially the Christians “herd morality” and “slave morality”. Even these moralities, which he disdains, he sees as arising from danger. Section 198 begins, “All these moralities that address themselves to the individual, for the sake of his “happiness”, as one says—what are they but counsels for behavior in relations to the degree of *dangerousness* in which the individual lives with himself.” They are designed to suppress his passions, especially those that would disturb “the herd” from within, such as aggressiveness and desire to dominate over others. They are rules for the herd to live together peaceably with a minimum of danger for any individual from another.

These herd moralities historically follow more barbarian and “natural” moralities that arose in times and places in which there was another sort of danger, namely, danger to the tribe or polis from outside itself, whether from wild animals or natural disasters or other outside, aggressive groups. When the group of human beings is threatened from without, especially when the very survival of the group is at stake, the people value those characteristics that allow them to survive and prosper as a group. Hence they value strong leadership, courage, and aggressiveness. There is little interest in mercy and pity upon the enemy that threatens their lives; in fact, the group is benefited by those who have the ability and inclination to attack and vanquish other competing groups. The danger they fear is from outside the

group, and they fear for their survival, and so they develop an aristocratic society that ranks more powerful men higher than less powerful ones. The domination of the powerful serves the security of the community. “They want hardness...a type with few but very strong traits, a species of severe, warlike, prudently taciturn men.” (Section 262)

Once the community perceives itself as secure from outside destruction, its attention turns to dangers from within. The same aggressiveness and will to power that protected the community is now directed between individuals within the community, and its citizens begin to fear one another more than the outside threat. There is a chaos of competition within the community, and the morality changes so as to discourage aggressiveness and the will to power over others, instead encouraging behaviors and values that support the weak and mediocre. “Nothing will stand the day after tomorrow, except *one* type of man, the incurably *mediocre*.” (Section 262)

I believe Nietzsche realized that this democratized celebration of the mediocre would be the final state of man unless some external danger again arose. He himself sees this increasing democratization of all of life as a type of corruption and a degeneration of the species Man. He sees mankind as in *danger* of continued cultural diminution and degradation, and hence he issues a clarion call for a new generation of philosophers who will challenge all and seek to restore a morality based on the will to power. This danger, perceived by the philosophers but not by the common man, may stimulate the former to abandon the “slave morality” of Christianity, but will hardly motivate the latter to change his morality in the absence of perceived danger. After all, “danger [is] the mother of morals”. (Section 262). For there to be any hope of changing the morality of Europe back to a more natural, semi-barbaric

form, there will need to arise an external danger to its very survival. This, he believes, may come from imperial Russia.

In Section 208, Nietzsche evaluates the “will to power” of several European nations, and finds both England and Spain to be stronger in this than his own Germany, and especially France, which is “most seriously sick.” But the greatest strength to will he sees as being stored up in Russia, “waiting menacingly to be discharged.” He hopes that the increase in the menace of Russia—the outside danger—would grow so large that western Europe would “have to resolve to become menacing too,” regaining the circumstances that lead to a morality of power, rather than of equality and deference. It is interesting to speculate what Nietzsche would have thought of the great wars of the 20th century, in which these very countries were pitted against one another and in which, by the end of the century, the “degenerate” democracies seem to have won the day.

According to Nietzsche, considerations of the various types of dangers perceived by societies, and by individuals within those societies, provides a key to understanding their moralities. “Danger is the mother of moralities.”