Friedrich Nietzsche and the Thematics of Slavery and Knowledge: A Study on Truths and Rebellions

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One

The relationship between African-American philosophy and the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche has not been entirely neglected; recently, a whole volume has been dedicated to elaborating this curious relationship. This volume demonstrates a number of the ways in which Nietzsche might prove to be a valuable resource in race studies and even perhaps a friend in the fight for racial peace. Here we wish to consider this connection further by suggesting a new line of thought on this issue.

Specifically, we wish to recommend a reading of certain ideas in the work of W.E.B DuBois as essentially and radically Nietzschean. We will attempt to demonstrate that the reading suggested provides DuBois’s analysis with not only a greater depth of meaning, but a more compelling argument altogether. Additionally, some attention will be paid, less optimistically, to a certain question in the writings of DuBois, which appears to be a specific and, if our investigations are indeed well founded, an exceedingly problematic Nietzschean inheritance. In short, we should attempt to read DuBois with Nietzsche in mind so long as it is helpful, while always remaining conscious of the excess baggage one might be taking on by borrowing from such a radical and controversial thinker.

However, the connection to DuBois, although it would perhaps justify itself, is important not only for what it might do for DuBois, but for what it appears to open up beyond itself. In this one specific and localized contact with African-American thought, it becomes clear that Nietzsche, particularly in his ideas on the Jews and the slave revolt in the history of morals, sketches the rudiments of something like a theoretical schema of rebellion, a conceptual rubric for reading revolt in any number of its possible concrete
actualizations. We will try to demonstrate that Nietzsche’s analysis extends far past the Jews toward any number of both intellectual and physical enslavements.

Two

W.E.B. DuBois, perhaps the most influential of early American thinkers on race, studied in Germany at a time when Nietzsche’s work would have been in circulation. It would not have been a very popular circulation, but we can certainly suppose that at the time it was being read in many academic circles. We can thus easily imagine that DuBois, studying under the eminent sociologists Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, came across work by Nietzsche at this time.

This speculation, for which there does not appear to be any concrete verification, seems nonetheless likely given DuBois’s arguments from perspectivism, a viewpoint for which Nietzsche was and is one of the greatest spokesmen. It is in this context that we wish to consider the ideas of double-consciousness, second sight, and the Veil. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois writes:

…the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others…

The Veil hangs over the black son’s eyes from the moment of birth. It is there from the moment of birth because it is neither acquired by chance a posteriori nor can it be removed at one’s will: it is a fact of nature in captivity, an aspect of the slave’s human condition. America is a white world. The black man in America is born different, for he
is not born into a black world. By the very fact of being black in a white world, he is forced to offer himself to the dominating white world, he must see them, speak to them, offer his self to their other; but it is never the other way around, for America is already a white world. The significance of the Veil will be better understood when we return to it in a moment.

“World” must be read here as indicating a largely but not necessarily closed epistemological universe. What is known is a world; “world” is what we call the sum of our cultural, scientific, practical, and historical facts and values. But we only “know” through language and similar kinds of cultural transmission. In a society that accepts slavery or has only recently abolished it, the slaves are excluded from the world of that society. Slaves are essentially denied the right to live in a world. Although they might be able to cultivate a limited culture, for example through an oral tradition of song, they are inherently excluded from the world that surrounds them and enslaves them. They are not educated in that language, they cannot read the books of that tradition, they cannot learn the practices of free craftsmen, and they cannot learn to live in the customs of that free world.

Perhaps most importantly, they cannot contribute to that conversation. Incidentally, this is why one marvels at artifacts of slave culture, for instance, what DuBois calls “Sorrow Songs”; they are contributions to a conversation by non-participants. Conversations presuppose recognition and the freedom to think and speak. Slaves have neither recognition as participants nor the freedom required. They are not only prohibited from receiving the wealth (in the cultural sense of that word, as well as the literal sense) of their society’s world, they are not allowed to even pay into it any way
other than material labor. Thus, on the other side of Sorrow might be Triumph, the small
triumph of having voiced oneself, to however limited an extent, in a conversation for
which one was given neither recognition nor freedom. Thus is the peculiar fascination
and admiration for the cultural contributions of an enslaved people.

Notwithstanding the artistic and emotive power of the Sorrow Songs, the essential
point is as follows. An enslaved people is denied the world of the society that enslaves
them because they are denied all of that which constitutes that world. Most importantly,
slave populations are, of course, overwhelming illiterate. If language constitutes thought,
then to know means to read and write. Further, it means that language conditions our
thought; we cannot “know” that which we do not have words for, and we cannot have
meaningful words for that which we do not have knowledge of. To talk about an
enslaved race and the enslaving race as belonging to different worlds, we must
understand this as fundamentally different modes of thought, because slavery represents a
supreme exclusion from a society’s means of “knowing.” This should suffice to explain
the concept of “world” in the passage above, as well as it might appear at many points
elsewhere in DuBois’s writings.

Three

Now, what happens when a race is forced to raise generations in the middle of a
world from which they are excluded? It is impossible to live through the day, let alone
survive generations, without some kind of world, some kind of knowledge, a set of
traditions, that is, at the very least, some general passed-on know-how to approach the
problems of daily existence. Since slaves are excluded from the world and conversation
of their masters’ society, they cultivate their own. This means they develop, on their own, unique ways for going about in their conduct, speaking, writing, loving, hating, which is all to say, *knowing*. This is their Veil.

The Veil consists in the sum of those practices, gestures, skills, and categories that are developed, out of necessity, by an enslaved people who are denied any other. It makes sense for DuBois to call it a Veil because that is the most telling metaphor for those cultural techniques—first and foremost language—which serve to represent reality. In the beginning, words serve to express our visions, to encapsulate them and pass them; that is, they serve to assist or aid vision. In the long-run, when we grow too accustomed to them and *forget*—a critical word in the Nietzschean lexicon—that they are just words, just arbitrary ways of approaching reality, they then serve to distort and limit our vision. We refuse, or lose the ability, to see without or beyond our limited stock of words.

We now come to the perspectival upshot. Keeping in mind the above discussion, consider Nietzsche:

> There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak of a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity” be.\(^5\)

If knowledge is necessarily perspectival, and if it is true that multiplicity of viewpoints is the way to the most legitimate knowledge, the significance of “second-sight,” as it appears in DuBois should become clear at once. It will be worth it, however, to unpack it slowly.

Because culture, and within it language and thus knowledge, grows in the form of a tradition, then a white society which cultivates its own culture has, ultimately, one
general way of approaching existence. Within the tradition of one general, societal culture, there is, of course, room for movement and certain flexibilities in viewpoint. However, implied in the general unity of a tradition is an ultimate common denomination, which is something like the outer-most bounds of possible meaningful knowledge; this common denomination is first and foremost language and basic gesturing. But the point is that each tradition is a very general perspective, and so long as one is an heir to it, there is certain point at which one is absolutely unable to break out of it. One might have the most revolutionary idea, but so long as he or she was brought up traditionally in custom, practice, and language, the most revolutionary idea or perspective will only be so revolutionary; it will grow from the same knowledge-techniques and be put in the same limited stock of representations common to the life of all the others, and at the very least be expressed in their language.

We may therefore say that an enslaved people have the claim to what is perhaps the very closest thing to a truly and absolutely radical—absolutely other—perspective. The world of an enslaved people is a world cultivated in the most radical isolation humankind has on record. The “second sight” of an enslaved or recently freed race is therefore a fundamentally unique store of knowledge, which, as a world closed shut from outside by force, has built itself up with its own internal momentum. Even the advanced, modern cultures of free societies that are distinguished by difference in language and custom influence each other to a great degree and can therefore claim little autonomy or independence as perspectives. Additionally, the store of knowledge that belongs to an enslaved people is not reproducible or achievable through other means. The most honest free man cannot simulate it.
Thus, if DuBois’s idea of second sight was not actually inspired by Nietzsche’s writings, at any rate it only achieves its fullest force by a radical Nietzschean reading. What Nietzsche makes explicit in a fairly rigorous philosophical fashion is that truth turns on perspective. And if this is true, the social value of a recently freed slave population, such as that for which DuBois is lending his efforts, is actually far greater than the sum of its rightful human dignity. The stakes are no less than truth itself.

Four

We should pause a moment to wonder whether the effects of a Nietzschean reading of DuBois are wholly salutary in relation to DuBois’s presuppositions and goals. Nietzsche treated what he called the problem of hierarchy in a way that certain contemporary liberal sensibilities would consider harsh. He thought that the strict attention must be paid to differences, distinctions, and rank. He was, of course, a strong critic of democracy, egalitarianism, and socialism. A particular concern in reading DuBois is a certain kind of elitism that seems to color a good deal of DuBois’s writings. It is an elitism that contradicts the equalitarian presuppositions that are the strongest support for anti-racism.

In *The Talented Tenth*, DuBois assigns to the elite not only the production of better men, he assigns them also the preliminary task—begun by DuBois himself, who, we can have little doubt, understood himself as a member of the talented tenth—to define what it means to be a man.

The race must be set in a hierarchy in which the best, at the top, will mould and guide those naturally at the bottom. Even the superficial difficulties, which should be
fairly obvious, should not be taken lightly. The endorsement of such a social hierarchy, built on criteria quite explicitly normative, at the very least, makes it impossible for DuBois to consistently defend a view which would recognize a basic, invariable human equality; for, if the very question of “manhood” is to be determined externally by those determined to be the “best” of men—then a basic human equality, is preceded, chronologically and logically, by the determination of what is human, what is “man.” And the right to decide what is manhood, according to DuBois, is to be determined essentially by merit.

Now, this elitism is intended by DuBois to be an intra-racial elitism. The major difficulty—the real harm caused by unwanted Nietzschean baggage—is that it is logically impossible to contain elitism within individual races; an intra-racial elitism quickly becomes a supra-racial elitism, which, in turn, brings us back to square one as it were. Once we enter the Nietzschean universe, which is always from the beginning one of distinction, rank, and hierarchy, the question of races is only one set of elements to be subjected to hierarchy. Such is a major difficulty for those who want to read DuBois with Nietzsche as their guide.

We should so far consider our time well rewarded if we have outlined a new way of considering the “second sight” of which DuBois speaks, in such a way that brings to the foreground the real strength of the idea. And we will prove wise to consider where Nietzsche no longer aids DuBois, and indeed where elements of Nietzsche might positively do harm with reference to DuBois’s ultimate aims. Having said that, however, there appears no reason why we cannot borrow our insights selectively.
Nietzsche was very much concerned with the idea of what he called, generally, “slave morality”—or, to the extent that his concern is specific, it is with the Jews, who he understood as igniting the “slave revolt” in the history of morals. Nietzsche uses the term “race” rather loosely; the English, the French, the Germans, and the Jews are all separate races. Nonetheless, because his concern with the Jews, particularly in the *Genealogy*, is rooted in their oppression and enslavement, there is no reason that his ideas should not find fruitful application in a theoretical understanding of other kinds of slavery—for instance, of black slavery and its treatment in race studies.

Nietzsche’s admiring fascination with the Jews is based on what he rightfully detects as an intellectual alliance with his own philosophy. The Jews, as slaves, were dominated by their masters, which means that they were dominated by a ruling knowledge, a ruling morality, a set of norms, a general, all-encompassing “thou shalt” imposed on them. The intellectual response, which, Nietzsche thinks, sought to overturn this domination, was naturally of a skeptical tint, for its first task had to be to *question* the master morality. The Jews, in their slave morality, demonstrated the malleability of morals by exposing the error of their masters’ knowledge and then reversing it—error retaining, of course, an entirely relative meaning. The slave revolt in morality was a revaluation of values, which, of course, was Nietzsche’s own goal. And the Jews achieved it, first and foremost, intellectually, i.e. discursively. Nietzsche understands it as an inversion of the prevailing moral vocabulary.

Mainstream intellectual traditions of positive monotheism have generally put on one side truth with morality and set on the other side error and evil. This is also a
Socratic theme. The moral was founded in truth and evil arose out of error. Thus, crusading Christianity burned heretics at the stake as much for their error as their immorality. Nietzsche recounts an historical event that will be necessary to quote in full, as it will become even more significant in some of our other considerations.

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient encountered the invincible order of the Assassins, that order of free spirits *par excellence*, whose lowest ranks followed a rule of obedience the like of which no order of monks ever attained, they obtained in some way or other a hint concerning that symbol and watchword reserved for the highest ranks alone as their secretum: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”—Very well, *that* was freedom of spirit; in *that* way the faith in truth itself was abrogated.⁹

In the footnote to this passage, Kaufmann clarifies that the Assassins were an eleventh century Islamic sect the initiated of which “‘knew the worthlessness of all positive religion and morality; they believed in nothing…’” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed.).” Nietzsche’s praise of the Assassins is revealing in a number of ways, some of which we will consider shortly. For now, it is interesting for the reason that the Assassins, as an “invincible order” during the period of the crusades, were widely known as heretics and their “terror” was quite feared. They were heretics motivated by the drives of hashish, a drug from which the very term “assassin” derives.¹⁰ Nietzsche singles out for praise a group of heretical murderers who symbolize a radical rejection of the prevailing, crusading religious truths, and for that matter *all truths*. Their free-spirited physicality and cruelty, not driven by dogma but by drug-induced drives, was channeled into a systematic *agon* against, in critique of, Christian truth and morals.

Nietzsche is favorably fascinated with the Assassins because his goal is the same: to reverse the Christian and Socratic ordering of truth and morals. Morality may
be an “indispensable” fiction, but it is always an error.\textsuperscript{11} This is just as true regarding the other elements of culture. Knowledge is always error. Science, history, rhetoric—all disciplines—are, strictly speaking, errors.\textsuperscript{12} This is because error begins with the imposition of necessarily finite and inadequate languages on an infinitely robust, infinitely different concrete reality; when disciplines do not require language, they rarely dispense with symbolism altogether; when they dispense with symbolism they dispense with the pretense of conveyance and therefore that of knowledge.

Six

“Truth” can only be had at the expense of forgoing the pretenses of a formulated knowledge. Pre-metaphysics and pre-language, it amounts to stillness, silence, and absolute inefficacy; it is absolute letting-go of morals, of knowledge, of the disciplines. It is raw experience without the distortions of a formulated knowledge. The formulation of knowledge is the imposition of a discipline on a fundamentally undisciplined reality. The birth of language, metaphysics, is the birth of error. Truth, therefore, is evil because it precludes life.

Nietzsche is admiringly fascinated with the Jews because, as an oppressed people, they brought forward a perspective not available to the masters and thus balanced our error and moved us closer to truth. This is not to suggest that in Nietzsche’s understanding, morality’s slave revolt and the endurance of its effects are salutary. Rather, although this is not our chief concern, Nietzsche’s strong anti-anti-semitism and his constant pointing to the Jews as positive models is tied first to the strength and sheer success of their revolt, but secondly to the fact that they accomplished what he is working
toward: revaluation through revolt and rebellion. More specifically, slave morality is always a *skeptical* morality as its first step will always be the critique, or calling into question, of the master morality.

Furthermore, positive Judeo-Christian monotheism finds some of its most powerful critiques in the tradition of negative theology, and this tradition finds one of its most important voices in Jewish philosophy. The continuities between Nietzsche and Maimonides, for instance, have already been demonstrated. Maimonides, probably the most important Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, rejected the notion that one could have a positive knowledge of God and justify affirmative truth-claims regarding him. We wish to argue that negative theology is essentially the epistemological rebellion against positive monotheism, which operates within the same thematics as Judaism’s moral slave rebellion as well as the concrete rebellions of black slaves. Remember that the *Britannica* excerpt Kaufmann offers in his edition of the *Genealogy* attributes to the Assassins the belief in the “worthlessness of all positive religion.” This is one of the reasons that Nietzsche’s admiring fascination with the Assassins is quite relevant: in roughly the same time period, the Assassins were putting into action a radical interpretation of negative theology, a philosophy the most well known Jewish spokesman for which is Maimonides himself. Whereas in positive monotheism the truth of a positive knowledge of god is posited as the premise of morality, negative theology refutes those foundational truths and thus clears space for a new tradition. In this sense, it is destructive, it is Dionysian. Negative theology is a nearly diametrical reperspectivization, which begins with the epistemological rebellion of skepticism, refutes the positive predication of God, and finally proceeds to build a distinct tradition—
a tradition of knowledge, belief, and conduct. Nietzsche revealingly states that in the beginning of the revaluation of values, on the threshold of which he stands, the movement over that threshold would have to be “designated, negatively at first, as extra-moral.” This note greatly sharpens our reading of rebellion thematics.

Important also is that post-slavery traditions grow alongside—and, more importantly, through—alternative praxes. Maimonides explains that the Jewish practice of animal sacrifice originated as differentiation and individuation. The Egyptians, enslavers of the Jews, worshipped Aries and thus prohibited the slaughter of sheep. The Jews, in their new freedom, began to cultivate this tradition in order to distinguish their identity from the surrounding nations. But more important than differentiation is the enactment of a refutation. The sign of Aries is an idol; it represents, most importantly, a truth claim. Gods and superstitions have importance in their claim to knowledge in a world of uncertainty. Furthermore, as in the case of Aries, religious conceptions are used to order practical existence and to establish rules, prohibitions, and commandments. Thus, religious idols, which are always knowledge symbols (the truth invested in them constitutes their significance) always have a political mirroring and a practical function that serves to limit, order, or direct the freedom of individuals. When the Jews began slaughtering animals, they actively demonstrated the arbitrariness of the Egyptian prohibition, and in doing so it refuted at least one example of the epistemological foundations on which the Egyptians justified their prohibitions. The Jews through their post-enslavement practice thereby critique the legitimacy of enslavement, which is the perfect achievement of prohibition.
When a formerly enslaved people create new traditions, new disciplines of life and with new vocabularies, it presents a new, although still arbitrary, way of dealing with existence. It might not be truer than any other, but it is a new perspective and thus one small step toward circling-in on truth.

Seven

A reproduction of this very theoretical structure, but *in concreto*, is the slave rebellion. The master morality, which posits the truth of superiority as the justification of enslavement is called into question not intellectually, but physically. The slave has been denied the development of his intellect, but he has not been denied life altogether. The slave, as already discussed, develops his own approach to existence. The greater part of his knowledge naturally consists in the skills the slave is forced to perform. Namely, a slave *knows* work, action, tools, and the power as well as the pain of physical exertion. The suffering of slavery inspires a skepticism in its justice—but the slave knows little of academic debates! What the slave knows best is brute force and power. In the slave rebellion, the slave enacts a skepticism that grows from necessity, from the intolerability of oppression. The master morality is refuted demonstratively. That the master ought to enslave the black because the black is inferior, sub-human, and underneath the white master is refuted by the slave rebel who now stands *above* his former master and in control of the master’s life. The successful slave rebel, through physical means, clears space for himself in the prevailing morality while at the same time literally clearing physical space for himself. The slave rebellion demonstrates the error of the master’s
knowledge, and it does so mainly by means of its unique perspective on oppression—by a closer intimacy with physical exertion, pain, and suffering.

When Douglass, in his famous fight with Covey the slave-breaker, gains a definitive advantage over his captor he nonetheless exercises an economy of force and cruelty.\(^\text{16}\) This is not a slave rebellion and would certainly demand a different cast if we wished to organize the elements at work in this event. What this instance shows, and what is reinforced in Douglass’s recasting of the event, is that Douglass, with his hands wrapped around the very neck of his slaver, exercised an almost inexplicable restraint. It is perfectly possible that without the first-hand knowledge of the meaning of suffering, very few men could spare the life of their life-long oppressor. In this event, Douglass dramatizes an interpretation of human association viewed from an angle that presupposes the experience of suffering. One who knows of dominating but does not have the knowledge of being dominated cannot know a limit to domination; his knowledge has no internal mechanism for checking itself so long as it is unaware of its opposite, that which moves in resistance to it and would thus halt its advance. Douglass interprets this perspective through his action and the spectacle is a moral statement: his fight demonstrates a limit of the appropriate application of force. After that fight, the meaning or the “truth” of force is altered, and so is his status as a subject.\(^\text{17}\)

Eight

The thematics of slavery, and particularly revolt, is organized by the vocabulary of knowledge and truth. The narration of the Jews and their moral slave revolt is mirrored epistemologically in the intellectual tradition of negative theology. In modern
history, these thematics were enacted and dramatized by black slave rebellions. These stories, widely separated historically, share such isomorphic thematics because at work in each of them is first and foremost shifts in the status of knowledge, either by way of action or by way of discourse—two techniques that are ultimately just one. This is why Nietzsche’s ideas on the origins of Judaism illuminate alternative meanings in the concrete phenomenon of slavery: the inversion of moral vocabularies and the violent, physical inversion of enslavement can be understood as the same phenomenon produced through acts that are, of course, in an immediate sense, distinct. Something quite important is happening at the point the thematics of a purely intellectual revolt (with negative theology as only one example) are transposed onto both the fundamentally physical and practical event of the slave rebellion as well as Nietzsche’s narration of the Jews’ moral slave revolt. This transposition demonstrates the character of the contact between knowledge and praxis. What it suggests is that knowledge and truth—that is, the prevailing and dominant notions of what is right, wrong, good, bad, etc.—are always negotiated in a conversation between the intellect and “rationality” on one side, and the course of human actions, events, and gestures on the other. One might be lead to speculate, then, whether the nineteenth century’s abolitions of black slavery would have been possible had the physical rebellion of slaves never once took place, had the discourses on abolition, those voices of rationality, never had enactments, dramatizations, proofs, knowledge-productions on which to base their truths. At any rate, it is only proper and no doubt should have been expected that Nietzsche, who has done so much work for us here, should be rather vindicated by our efforts.
Notes

4 DuBois, Souls, 4.
7 Cf. for instance Beyond Good and Evil, 79.
8 Nietzsche, Genealogy, I:7.
9 Nietzsche, Genealogy, III:24.
11 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil. On error not being an objection, see 4. On morality being an error, see Part 5 On the Natural History of Morals, 75-92. Also Genealogy particularly, as well as any number of other places.
14 It is interesting to note that only a few pages after the allusion to the Assassins, at the very end of Section 25 Nietzsche quotes with clear sarcasm the following unattributed maxim: “There is no knowledge: consequently—there is a God.” If it is not impossible that here Nietzsche is mocking negative theology, then we would be facing the end of any continuities that might exist between Nietzsche and Maimonides. This, while it does not seem to do any harm to our argument here, might perhaps show Nietzsche’s familiarity with negative theology, and perhaps even with Maimonides particularly, which he chose to demonstrate only with reference to the Assassins who better fit his critique of asceticism.
15 Botwinick, Skepticism, Belief, and the Modern, 133.
17 Acampora, Unlikely Illuminations, 178. Acampora quotes and provides an interesting discussion regarding Douglass’s statement, “I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW.”