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# Nietzsche's Laughter, Plato's Beard

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Postmodern thought is marked by a rejection of tradition; more specifically, the tradition of metaphysics. Every thinker who is considered to be "post-modern" has in some way or another challenged some aspect (or the entirety) of modern metaphysics. Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps one of the first philosophers to (arguably) fall under the category of postmodernity.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's case is unique, however. His *modus operandi* deals not so much with the destruction of reconfiguration of metaphysics, but with *laughing* at it. For Nietzsche, laughter is the natural, and perhaps most healthy, reaction to the human condition. It allows one to function in a world that would otherwise be so confusing, so overwhelmingly incongruent and frustrating, that despair would inevitably claim anyone who took it too seriously.

The root of Nietzsche's thoughts on this matter can be found in the tale of Silenus, which he relates in *The Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>2</sup> Silenus reveals to the wise king Midas that all of humanity lives in vain; we would be better off not to have existed at all. The tale is an ancient one, but Nietzsche clearly believes that there is truth in it yet. The tale of Silenus serves as a backdrop for the entirety of Nietzsche's philosophy. Silenus lurks in the background of his work, playfully taunting human vanity.

The tale also serves as metaphoric narrative. Our search for truth has been long and arduous, just as king Midas' was, and in the end the only truth to be found leads to despair and cynicism. Midas serves as man's representative in the quest for knowledge. He pursues the truth with all of the resources at his disposal, and is ultimately victorious. But the victory is bittersweet at best. Silenus, who can view mankind from the privi-

leged position of a demigod, reveals the ever so elusive truth to humanity's chosen representative. Midas learns that the truth which he has sought so fervently reveals only the vanity of his own existence.

As regards humanity, Nietzsche says, "Their senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things."<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche was a firm believer in man's inherent ignorance. He believed that humanity could never in any way arrive at any "truth in and of itself," and that all of our so called truths are in fact merely figures of speech that have been so overused as to seem truthful. Thus, Truth is too elusive to be found by mankind, as we lack the tools that are necessary in order to ever grasp it.

In this light, Silenus, as the embodiment of Truth takes on a different meaning. In the tale, after his capture by Midas, he refuses to speak for some time, and when he at long last does speak he reveals not the Truth but a warning. A warning to those who would seek the Truth. Silenus *is* the Truth Nietzsche finds impossible to achieve. Even when one thinks he has found it, it serves only to reveal how little one actually knows. Silenus' warning to Midas in this way is not so much an endorsement of extreme cynicism, but a simple statement that there is no "best and most desirable of all things for man," all we have is this precarious life, and that leads only to certain death.

The tale of Silenus is an excellent analogy for man's position in relation to his surroundings. He seeks the Truth,, only to have it taunt him and then slip from his grasp. He who seeks the Truth can find only the despair prescribed by Silenus. "The pride connected with

knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence,"<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche states. This deception "concerning the value of existence" is, of course, that if there *were* such a thing to be sought, it should actually be available to us as human beings. To engage in such a quest is clearly a futile effort, and one would be better off never to have begun it. Of course, deception in and of itself is not necessarily bad, according to Nietzsche. "Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency ... only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency,"<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche asserts in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. At the end of the same text, he paints a positive picture of the stoic as one who "executes a masterpiece of deception" when in the face of misfortune he wears the mask of dignity.<sup>6</sup> It would seem then, that Nietzsche endorses self deception in the face of what appears to be a lack of actual Truth. When faced with stark reality (or lack thereof), one should "exchange truths for illusions."<sup>7</sup>

This concept of intentional forgetfulness appears throughout Nietzsche's work. In the *Birth of Tragedy* he claims, "These Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness."<sup>8</sup> This self-forgetfulness can perhaps best be seen as a defense mechanism used as an alternative to the self-deception of Truth. The difference is purely pragmatic. The deception called "Truth" leads to the life of futility warned against by Silenus, while self-forgetfulness leads to "repose, security, and consistency." The main distinction lies in the intention. The seeker of Truth actually believes that which his senses present to him to be true, while he who practices active forgetting realizes that Truth is forever beyond his grasp, but that self-deception is the only way to make sense of the world. Thus, the latter

could be seen as a pragmatic response to the human condition, while the former is a vain struggle *against* the human condition, while the former is a vain struggle against the human condition.

The underlying problem with self-forgetting is that people often tend to take it far too seriously. So seriously, in fact, that they forget that they are forgetting, which leaves them in the same position as king Midas and other seekers of Truth. It was partially to address this issue that Nietzsche wrote *The Gay Science*. Walter Kaufmann said of this text, "What Nietzsche himself wanted the title to convey was that serious thinking does not have to be stodgy, heavy, dusty, or in one word, Teutonic."<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Nietzsche is attempting to counter those who take their intellectual pursuits so seriously that they convince themselves and others that they have a grasp on the Truth. This seriousness is the legacy of metaphysics, from Plato to the present, and Nietzsche believes that it is to be avoided.

This is where the utility of laughter enters the picture. Man has found himself trapped between the proverbial rock and hard place. On the one hand he can deceive himself by believing that he has access to what is True, which leads to a life spent in vain pursuit of a goal he can never achieve. On the other hand, he can deceive himself by ignoring (self-forgetting) the state of ignorance in which he must forever dwell, pretending that what he perceives is true, despite his knowledge of the contrary. In either case, one is forced into a situation which demands self-deception. Nietzsche's solution to this problem is far simpler than either of these: laugh

Laughter serves as a panacea for the ailments caused by man's limited intellect. Indeed, even in his earliest works Nietzsche endorsed jubilation and laughter: "In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing. His very gestures

express enchantment."<sup>10</sup> In the context of *The Birth of Tragedy* "song and dance" refer to the Dionysian; that which deals with celebration in a sense, self-forgetting. Thus, Nietzsche makes it clear that he believes that this lighter side, the Dionysian, raises man to a higher status, above and beyond the realm of mortals; he becomes godlike.

But how does this transformation occur? What is it about laughter that leads man beyond the limitations of his limited intellectual capacity. For Nietzsche, laughter is similar to intoxication, which blurs the "reality" around us and elevates us to a dream-like state: "He feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity."<sup>11</sup>

This concept of Dionysian laughter is the very answer Nietzsche offers us for the dilemma outlined above. The relationship between laughter and intoxication is further stressed in the text by the use of the word "paroxysms" in conjunction with intoxication; a word which is often used in the same manner with laughter.<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche stresses again and again the "elevated" status brought about by laughter. For him laughter transcends the mortal realm and leads one beyond the confines of human limitations to a higher state in which these limitations are of no importance.

Yet it is not at first clear how this laughter differs from self-forgetting. They both seem to involve a self-inflicted ignorance of man's pitiable state. The one by active forgetting, the other by laughter. Both in one way or another deal with the knowledge that the Truth is beyond the grasp of humanity, and both offer ways for man to live with "repose, security, and consistency." The difference lies in the fact that the one operates through deception, while the other in no way attempts to deceive. The self-forget-

ter (if I may be permitted to coin such a phrase) engages in a self-deception every time he actively forgets that everything he perceives is a lie. While this deception is very pragmatic, and allows its practitioner to function in his environment, it is nevertheless deception, and even for Nietzsche, striving for knowledge is better than deceiving oneself.

Laughter, as opposed to self-forgetting, does not involve deception of any sort. On the contrary, the Dionysian has come to understand the fictitious nature of the Truth, and instead of ignoring it, or attempting to forget it, he chooses to laugh at it. He faces the vanity of his situation and the impotence of his intellect not with the deceptive "dignified mask" of the stoic, or the stodgy seriousness of the metaphysician, but with paroxysms of Dionysian laughter. He rises above his surroundings by mocking them, he finds solace in the irony of life that surrounds him.

Thus, laughter in this way is clearly *not* deceptive. It could perhaps best be seen as making the best of a bad situation. The Dionysian, when faced with the futility of his struggles does not despair or lie to himself, but simply finds humor. Humor then takes him beyond the futility, and he becomes "like a god." According to Gilles Deleuze, "For Nietzsche, laughter always refers to an exterior movement of irony and humor, a movement of intensities, of intensive qualities, as Klossowski and Lyotard have pointed out."<sup>13</sup>

This "movement of intensities" refers to humanity's situation as regards Truth. When one is faced with the intensity of our surroundings (and their corresponding message from our friend Silenus), the best reaction is to laugh. The more intense our surroundings, the more intense the laughter. The resulting intoxicated state forces us to transcend this intensity until it decreases to insignificance, and we can again go about our business. Laughter serves as a filter, with which we protect ourselves from the intense futility and anguish that sur-

rounds us. It is indeed a panacea, curing us of the disease of seriousness and futility, it sends Silenus scurrying back into the primeval forest where he belongs, and temporarily diverts Midas from his misguided quest.

In this way, laughter is far more pragmatic than even self-forgetting, because the Dionysian never lies to himself. For the self-forgetter, the façade of his deception can at any time crumble, revealing the taunting figure of Silenus, and his all too real words of wisdom. The self-forgetter balances on a precarious ledge between blissful self-imposed ignorance, and terrifying knowledge of humanity's (not at all intentional) ignorance.

The Dionysian, however, stands upon much more secure ground. Whenever Midas' hunt becomes too real, too intense, the Dionysian needs merely to laugh, to toss back his head in a state of beautiful intoxication and "dance with the gods." One must not understand this laughter as mocking the problem, or making light of Silenus' statement. Far from it, the laughter mocks man's propensity to take the problem too seriously, to hang on Silenus' every word. Thus laughter serves not to lessen the *condition* in which humanity is situated, but to lessen the degree to which we attach *importance* to the condition in which humanity is situated.

When Nietzsche says that laughter makes man "like unto a god," it is not meant to refer to the omniscience of the traditional Judeo-Christian God, but the capacity for action, the capacity for life, embodied in the Hellenic gods. The laughter transports us not to a realm of superior knowledge, but to one of superior propensity for action. Laughter enables man to act. Not in the way that self-forgetting does; not by carefully concealing the problem behind flimsy walls of self-deception. It enables us to act by *trivializing the problem* and provides us with a perspective which grants us more freedom of movement.

Not only does laughter allow us to act within the confines of our situation, but it

allows us to act with originality. In laughing at the irony of life and thereby entering the realm of the Dionysian<sup>14</sup>, we gain a unique perspective. By throwing back our heads and laughing at the futility of existence we assert not only our own life but our very will. We are in a manner of speaking saying, "This situation disgusts me, but my laughter will put it in its proper place so that it cannot bring me to despair." Laughter brings revelation, it elevates our existence so that we can find new ways to deal with our situation. Not necessarily to distance ourselves from it, nor to deceive ourselves about it, but work with it, to find solace in our laughter and security in our godliness.

Thus, if one were to map out a "genealogy of laughter," it would have to begin with the realization that Truth is beyond our grasp. It must be made clear that Nietzsche never denies the existence of an objective Truth, he merely asserts that statements we hold to be "truths" are nothing more than "dead metaphors". Once Truth is safely placed beyond the grasp of human ken, Nietzsche describes the dilemma we face. We can choose to continue to blindly pursue the Truth, despite the futility of this act, or we can choose to actively forget this fact, and continue to live as if what we perceived were in fact True, or we can choose to separate ourselves from this problem by transcending it through laughter. In the end, Nietzsche endorses laughter, because it is not only the most effective method of dealing with the human condition, but enables us to move beyond it for brief moments, expanding the terrain of our thoughts.

It was Nietzsche's own laughter that enabled him to write such original texts. Nineteenth century Germany was steeped in the tradition of modern metaphysics, but nevertheless, Nietzsche was able to some extent to move beyond it, to enter "the realm of the godlike." This capacity stems from his ability to see the irony evident all around him, and transcend it through laughter. Laughter in fact serves as a perfect icon for postmodernity. It



acknowledges both the successes and failures of metaphysics, while at the same time distancing the one who laughs from it and enabling him to critique and eventually move beyond it.

This transcending movement, however, is not such that the object which is being laughed at is somehow being made smaller. Laughter is in fact incapable of affecting the object of its mockery (except, of course, when one laughs at another person). What laughter is able to do is to elevate the position of the one who laughs. It does not so much deny the importance of what is being mocked, but affirm the greater importance of the one who laughs. Instead of affecting the object negatively, it affects the agent positively. One who laughs gains power from that laughter; the power to acknowledge its existence and move beyond it, because it does not cause him

to despair.

In order to reject, destroy, or even critique such a thoroughly entrenched tradition as metaphysics, one must be able to place it in its proper perspective and somehow move beyond it. Laughter serves as one of the better (perhaps best) means to this end. It elevates the one who laughs beyond the tradition and enables him to react from this superior vantage point. It is laughter alone which grants humanity the power to function not only *in* our environment, but *beyond* it as well. For Nietzsche, observation of the world and the struggle for knowledge are not inherently terrible things to do, as long as one doesn't take one's study, or one's self, too seriously. When the reality and futility of our surroundings grows too intense, our only hope is to throw back our heads, cast our gaze toward Olympus, and laugh at its folly.

#### Notes

1. Postmodernists would probably object to my use of the word "category," but I think for the purpose of expediency I shall let it remain.

2. Frederick Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Random House inc. 1967, p. 42.

There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysius, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for men. Fixed and immovable, the demi-god said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is the best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.'

3. Frederick Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a NonMoral Sense" *In Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, Daniel Breazeale, ed. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979) p. 80

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.* p. 86.

6. *Ibid.* p. 91.

7. *Ibid.* p. 81

8. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 36.

9. Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (Random House, 1974), p. 5.

10. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 37.

11. *Ibid.*

12. The German word "Paroxysmus", meaning paroxysm, is synonymous with the German word "Lachenfall", which uses the word "Lachen", meaning "to laugh" as its root. Thus it seems clear that the ambiguity is intentional.

13. Giles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought", in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David Allison (New York: Dell, 1971) p. 147.

14. It is important to remember the mythological distinction between the "Dionysian", and the "Olympian." Dionysius was not allowed upon Mount Olympus, and as a consequence was seen as distinct from the Olympian sect. Thus, in a way, one could see the Dionysian laughter which Nietzsche endorses as a response to the Olympian seriousness of their cult of Apollo and their traditionally "serious" modes of thought.