

Nietzsche and the Prince

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Abstract: The main character of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot* is a devout Orthodox Christian named Prince Myshkin. Friedrich Nietzsche, who is intensely critical of Christianity, and Myshkin share the same views on shame and pity despite their apparent ideological differences. They condemn the damaging effects of shame and praise the redeeming quality of pity for people who are put to shame. Nietzsche and Myshkin criticize the moral aspect of Christianity, but Nietzsche generalizes it for all of Christianity and Myshkin limits it to the Catholic Church. In the end, they both advocate a philosophy of love for humanity.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot* is centered on a well-meaning, religious prince named Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin.¹ This essay will show that the Christian prince Myshkin and the anti-Christian Friedrich Nietzsche share the same views on shame and pity, which should be the two emotions they disagree on most. To do this, Nietzsche’s conceptions of shame and pity are explained and compared to Myshkin’s interaction with the fallen girl, Marie. The parallels between the ideology of Nietzsche and the actions of the prince could raise the objection that Myshkin is not actually a Christian. This is rejected by Myshkin’s condemnation of Catholicism as a distortion of Christianity, which embodies Nietzsche’s attacks on Christianity in general.

Nietzsche’s concept of shame is complex as it is the result of morality exercised in custom. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Nietzsche’s conceptions of morality and custom that produce shame. Morality is a dichotomy of “good” versus “evil” that commands how people should act. The evolution of this morality, specifically Christian morality, is important to understanding how it affects custom and shame. Nietzsche contends that those people who had power over the lower orders made the first value judgments. These “masters” were the first to create the contrast between “good” and “bad.” Nietzsche writes that this contrast arose from “the continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Henry and Olga Carlisle (New York: Signet Classics, 2010).



those ‘below.’”² The masters believed that their position of power was “good” and that the lesser people who composed Nietzsche’s “slave” group and their servile actions were “bad.” The move from the “master morality” to the modern “slave morality” occurred when the slaves became more clever than the masters. Nietzsche writes that “the beginning of the slaves’ revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, being denied the proper response of action, compensate for it with imaginary revenge.”³ *Ressentiment* is Nietzsche’s term for the anger and hatred that the slaves had for the masters; it is a specific negative emotion that is directed at the masters for putting the slaves in their subservient position. The revolt of the slaves against the rule of the masters did not take place physically but was an intellectual revolution against the masters. The substantial power of the masters ensured the failure of a physical rebellion by the slaves, so they exercised their creativity to create a new morality that would subvert the ideology of the masters that was based on their resentment of the masters’ power. As a result, the new value system despised what the masters had previously prized: namely power, self-gratification, and “saying ‘yes.’”⁴ The new slave morality created the dichotomy of “good versus evil,” rather than the master dichotomy of “good versus bad.” Nietzsche wants to stress that the master morality was created out of a positive view of the way they lived, while the slave morality was the result of resentment of the masters and their way of life. Nietzsche summarizes the relationship neatly: “The ‘well-born’ *felt* they were ‘the happy’; they did not need first of all to construct their happiness artificially by looking at their enemies.”⁵ The new slave morality was inferior to the master morality by virtue of its creative drive, which was negative and created out of the opposite of master morality. This opposite, the good of slave morality, is counter to human instinct. Consequently, it created a “bad conscience” in humans.

This bad conscience is the internalization and regulation of human instinct and resultant self-punishment as a way to function within society.⁶ Outside of the individual, customs “are the

² Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic,” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 396.

³ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 419.

traditional way of behaving and evaluating.”⁷ In other words, customs and traditions are the practice of morality. If a person were to break custom, “punishment for breaches of custom [would] fall before all on the community.”⁸ The feeling that has been entrenched in humans when they break with custom, or indulge human instinct, is shame. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra spoke thusly of shame in a hypocritical follower of slave morality: “Your spirit has been persuaded to contempt of the earthly, but your entrails have not: *these*, however, are the strongest part of you! And now your spirit is ashamed that it must do the will of your entrails and follows by-ways and lying-ways to avoid its own shame.”⁹ Here Nietzsche clarifies that slave morality condemns what human instincts strive for, and the follower of this morality, who delights in this “honesty,”¹⁰ is inherently dishonest about one’s own nature. This dishonesty hides one’s instinctual desires in order to avoid the shame that one would suffer both internally and socially if one were to pursue one’s will to power in a way that involved dishonesty.

With shame understood in a moral and customary sense, Nietzsche explains how it should be dealt with in three aphorisms in the third book of *The Gay Science*.¹¹ Nietzsche writes, “*Whom do you call bad?* – Those who always want to put to shame. *What do you consider most humane?* – To spare someone shame. *What is the seal of liberation?* – No longer being ashamed in front of oneself.”¹² Nietzsche claims in the second aphorism that it is the height of humanity to spare someone shame. This establishes that shame is one of the most painful experiences, for to show humanity is to spare someone pain. Going back to the first aphorism in this context, calling people who put others to shame bad is a condemnation of people who inflict pain on others. Nietzsche writes that “only something that continues *to hurt* stays in the memory.”¹³ The pain of shame is not a temporary feeling; it lasts in the mind of the person who was shamed. In fact, the agony can be so great and lasting that if the person does what is deemed shameful while one is alone, the pain of shame will still be felt, even though there is no one there to

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 191.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 272.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 226.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morality,” 410.



condemn him or her. This leads to the third aphorism, which states that the “seal of liberation” is no longer being ashamed in front of oneself. This is the liberation from the causes of shame, from the customs and traditions that function to keep the moral structure of the society together. As Nietzsche remarks in “Daybreak,” “The free human being is immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition.”¹⁴ This self-dependence protects someone from the agony of shame. According to Nietzsche, then, the ideal human is one who does not inflict shame on another and who is not ashamed of oneself. In fact, this ideal human would try to alleviate the shame felt by others that was inflicted by society.

Nietzsche is also known for his vitriolic view of pity. He openly despises it, going so far as to call it both the deepest abyss¹⁵ and one of the greatest dangers.¹⁶ However, Nietzsche also writes of pity as beneficial when properly understood. In effect, he has two separate kinds of pity: one that is attached to slave morality and negative, and another that is freethinking and positive. To fully understand Nietzsche’s views on pity, it is vital to look at both of his conceptions of it.

The negative variation of pity is deeply rooted in Nietzsche’s slave morality. Christianity, the embodiment of slave morality and the target of many of his abuses, teaches this thoughtless variation of pity. The clearest example of Nietzsche’s thoughts on the pity that Christianity advocates is found in his aptly named work “The Anti-Christ: Curse on Christianity.” The first thing that Nietzsche explains about the nature of pity is that it is depressing. He writes, “Pity stands in antithesis to the tonic emotions which enhance the energy of the feeling of life: it has a depressive effect.”¹⁷ Feeling pity for another human being is saddening for both the person being pitied, as it preserves his or her weak position, and the person who pities, as he or she takes on the suffering of the pitied. This pity does not attempt to improve life and dwells on the suffering and negative aspects of life; it is nihilistic, according to Nietzsche. It seeks to abolish all suffering in life, but this is dangerous. Through suffering, humans can achieve great things and improve their overall quality

¹⁴ Nietzsche, “Daybreak,” 191.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 278.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” 226.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ: Curse on Christianity,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 488.

of life; it is the force behind progress.¹⁸ Nietzsche concludes that "this depressive and contagious instinct thwarts those instincts bent on preserving and enhancing the value of life: both as a *multiplier* of misery and a *conservator* of everything miserable."¹⁹ To Nietzsche, there are no benefits to this kind of pity; it weakens all who take part in it.

However, there is a form of pity that Nietzsche approves. He differentiates his pity from the Christian perception of pity by first saying what his pity is not. Nietzsche writes, "It is not pity for social 'misery,' for 'society' and its sick and injured, for the perennially depraved and downtrodden who lie around us everywhere; even less is it pity for the grumbling, oppressed, rebellious ranks of slaves who are looking to be masters."²⁰ Here Nietzsche states that his new pity is not for the typically pitiful. He even appears to have contempt for the lower classes who complain of their position. What then is his pity? He writes that "our pity is a more elevated, more far-sighted pity – we see how human beings are being reduced, how all of you are reducing them!"²¹ Nietzsche claims that the appropriate targets of pity are not the classically suffering but those people who suffer because of Christian morals. They who are put to shame, and the resultant lasting pain they are subjected to, are the ones whom Nietzsche thinks are worthy of or in need of pity. They should be pitied because they suffer needlessly; it is not beneficial, like the suffering that is condemned by Christianity, but it tears them down and incapacitates them. By being shown compassion, these people can recover their lives. The ideal, then, is to show pity for people who are put to shame. In this way, the results of the two pities are very different: the Christian pity results in sadness and a loss of the drive to improve, while Nietzsche's pity results in happiness and improvement in the life of the pitied. With Nietzsche's concept of pity explained, it is now necessary to examine the views of Prince Myshkin.

Prince Myshkin is an Orthodox Christian man who suffers from epilepsy and has a great capacity for kindness. Throughout *The Idiot*, Myshkin attempts to help people to improve their lives and alleviate their suffering. His nature in this regard is most clearly illustrated in his interaction with a girl named Marie, whom he

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future," in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 348.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," 488.

²⁰ Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," 347.

²¹ *Ibid.*



met while in a Swiss village for treatment of his epilepsy. In the village, Marie lived with her old, sick mother and took care of her while doing menial labor for the other villagers. She was seduced by a French commercial traveler, left the village with him, and was then abandoned by him. She had to beg her way back to the village, and, when she returned, her mother and everyone in the village put her to shame. Marie continued to care for her dying mother, but her mother refused to speak to, clothe, or feed Marie. When her mother died shortly after, the pastor publicly shamed Marie at her mother's funeral, going so far as to say that her actions caused the death. Marie then went to take care of the cattle of a local cowherd as a means to get what little food she could. Throughout her ordeal, everyone in the village ridiculed Marie, especially the children who would throw stones and mud at her, and she kept her head down in great shame.²² Myshkin said he "saw that she herself accepted it as perfectly right and proper and considered herself the lowest creature on earth."²³ Marie was overcome with shame.

Prince Myshkin saw what was happening to Marie and resolved to help her. He sold a diamond pin he had for a few francs and went out to give them to her. After he gave her the money, he recalled:

I kissed her and told her not to think I had any evil intentions, and that I kissed her not because I was in love with her but because I felt very sorry for her, and that from the very beginning I had not thought her guilty but only very unhappy. I wanted very much to comfort her then and to assure her that she should not consider herself beneath everyone, but she didn't seem to understand.²⁴

Myshkin gradually began to talk to the children of the village who ferociously abused Marie, and eventually the children began to feel sorry for her. They brought her food and clothing, and, as they interacted with her, they began to love her. After the funeral of Marie's mother, the children were incensed by the pastor's condemnation of Marie, and some of them threw stones through the windows of his home. Marie was overjoyed every time the

²² Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 68-73.

²³ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

children came to visit her, and they too were happy when they saw her. However, she became consumptive during the time she was neglected. Her condition worsened, but, when she died, she died happy and with the love of Myshkin and the children. Even at the end she was pained by the guilt and shame of her actions, but she managed to have some happiness.

The treatment that Marie received is representative of the shame and ill treatment that Nietzsche condemned. She went off with the French traveler and broke with custom. By doing so, Marie was put to shame by the villagers. The deep inner pain they subjected her to would have brought her life to a faster end and in complete misery had the prince not had pity on her. Myshkin realized that Marie's suffering was unnecessary. He attempted to tell her that she was not guilty and that she should not be ashamed; the villagers, notably her mother and the pastor, were in the wrong. It is significant that the pastor and her mother, the two people who should have taken pity on her, were her greatest opponents. The power of custom and morality is so strong that they had completely forsaken her. While Myshkin could not liberate her from the feeling of personal shame, he gave her some happiness in the love expressed by the children. Myshkin lived up to the Nietzschean ideal of pity and shame by trying to remove the effects of shame on Marie and taking constructive, rather than destructive, pity on her.

Since Myshkin was a devout Christian, it appears suspect that he would follow the values espoused by Nietzsche in the way that he does, or that he is even Christian. The way in which he teaches the children to love Marie is antithetical to the Christian moral law that the villagers adhere to. The children even break the pastor's windows after he publicly shames Marie at her mother's funeral. After Marie's death, the schoolteacher, pastor, and the caretaker who looks over Myshkin all condemn him for corrupting the children.²⁵ Interestingly, the entire interaction that Myshkin had with the children in Switzerland is much like the metamorphoses of the spirit in Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" of the camel, lion, and child.²⁶ The prince starts as the camel weighed down by morality. As he sees the suffering of Marie and the harshness of the children who persecute her, he takes the form of the lion and does battle with the dragon of morality. The dragon in Myshkin's account is the populace of the village. He conquers the dragon by

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁶ Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 263-264.



both showing pity on Marie and turning the children away from the moral system that oppressed her. Finally, the prince becomes the child in the way that he breaks from convention and is free from the shame and condemnation of others. In fact, his caretaker calls him a child, although derisively. Myshkin recounts, “He was entirely convinced I was a complete child myself, a real child, that is, and that only in my face and figure was I a grown-up person, but as for my development, my soul, my character, and perhaps even my intelligence, I was not an adult, and would never be one if I lived to be sixty.”²⁷ To Nietzsche, this insult would be a kind of complement for the innocent, creative, and life-affirming qualities attached to a child. Further, Myshkin tells a story about a drunken soldier who tried to dupe him into buying a tin cross, claiming that it was made of silver. He bought the cross and did not want to shame the man, although he knew that he would use the money to buy alcohol.²⁸ Myshkin did not even want to shame someone who was trying to peddle the cross itself. With his actions of teaching the children not to shame Marie and his own refusal to shame a drunkard attempting to cheat him, he is attacking Christian morality like in Zarathustra’s metamorphoses of spirit. Consequently, Myshkin does not appear as a Christian but as a Nietzschean.

Although he condemns some of the same things that Nietzsche condemns, Myshkin is a devout Christian. Myshkin does not attack Christianity in general, like Nietzsche, but concentrates his criticism towards the Catholic Church. He says that the Catholic Church “preaches a distorted Christ, a Christ it has calumniated and defamed, the opposite of Christ! It preaches the Antichrist.”²⁹ To Myshkin, Catholicism had subverted the essential Christian message in exchange for power. He continues, “The pope usurped the earth, an earthly throne, and took up the sword, and since then everything has been going on that way, except to the sword they have added craft, deceit, fanaticism, superstition, villainy.”³⁰ Myshkin is stating that Catholicism uses religion as a means to have temporal power, the completion of the dominance of slave morality and slaves. He maintains that the Catholic moral presence in Europe has caused the outpouring of nihilism, atheism, and socialism. The prince’s account of Catholicism is the source of much of the problems that he sees in Europe, much like Nietzsche’s Christianity.

²⁷ Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 567.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Prince Myshkin and Nietzsche have similar positions. They portray a religion that is a tool for temporal power: Myshkin's Catholicism uses morality to maintain the Church itself, and Nietzsche's Christianity topples what is natural to humans to constrain the strong and preserve the weak. Myshkin and Nietzsche both argue that it is the morality of these religions that deceives and cows people into obedience. When someone breaks with the customs of the moral system, this person is shamed by the rest of the community. The two men also pursue the same remedy for dealing with such moral systems: take pity on those who are persecuted by these systems and raise them to their proper dignity as humans. As a result, they both have what is essentially a message of love. This message seeks to eliminate the unnecessary and painful experience of shame. What they condemn is a temporal power structure that desires strict conformity through the use of shame. Nietzsche's attack on Christianity that is taken up by Myshkin is how they attempt to abolish what Myshkin refers to as "the Antichrist." In this way, Christianity and Nietzsche's philosophy are united in their love for humanity.

The difference between the two men is the drive behind the same remedy. Prince Myshkin thinks that there is a spiritual component among all humans that yearns for God. The Catholic Church commandeered the spirituality of the European people for its own gain. Nietzsche, however, thinks that the spirituality of the people was a clever trick by slaves to remove power from the masters. He thinks that the creative power of individuals is supreme.

In conclusion, the views of Nietzsche and the prince, which on the surface would be in conflict as anti-Christian and Christian, are actually quite similar. They both share the same views about the damaging effects of shame and the redeeming quality of pity for people who are put to shame. Nietzsche and Myshkin both criticize the moral aspect of Christianity, but Nietzsche generalizes it for all of Christianity and the prince limits it to the Catholic Church. Regardless of their differences of ideology, both men desire to help people who suffer from the moral judgments of others and to advocate a philosophy of love for humanity.

