

LIFE, POWER AND MEASURE IN NIETZSCHE'S WORK

1. NIETZSCHE AS A PHILOSOPHER OF MEASURE

In this paper we will try to show the importance of the notion of *measure* in Nietzsche's thought. Actually, Nietzsche is famous as a thinker of excess rather than of measure. This excess refers especially to the will to power, in which, as seen in Martin Heidegger's interpretation, the stress is on the features of dominance and the manipulation of the being reduced to a mere object. Maintaining that in the philosopher of the power a central role will be played by a concept such as that of measure seems, therefore, rather unfounded, at least at a first glance. In the same way the idea of measure seems to oppose also the exuberance of life that Nietzsche wants to free from any underestimation owing to the dualistic Platonic-Christian vision. But at last it is time to note here that to speak of the importance of measure in Nietzsche is the same as to say that in his thought (which is often seen as a wild vitalism) the rules of both thinking and acting have crucial relevance. Without rules it is impossible to find one's way, both when elaborating one's thoughts as well as when planning one's actions.

How then does the discourse on measure originate in Nietzsche? It is not the subject of direct thinking. Neither has it been developed *a priori*. On the contrary, it has its roots exactly in the concrete aspects of life and power. Without measure both life and power would not be in a position to express their creativity.

2. MEASURE AND JUDGEMENT IN LIFE

Let us start from life. It is well known that Nietzsche rejects the traditional point of view as regards the relation between the life dimension and the dimension of the rules necessary to regulate it. In traditional morals, real life is treated as something which is meaningless in itself. The meaning of living depends upon a principle that does not belong to the sphere of experience. Consequently our real life must adjust itself extrinsically to norms, rules and imperatives that set themselves against the sphere of wishes and instincts. This is why Nietzsche maintains that the men of morals say no to life and are therefore unable to accept the positive stimuli the latter contains. Actually the man of traditional morals not only spurns the positivity of life, but he exhibits

this negative capacity as a value and a virtue. This is the soil that grows the fruits of resentment and envy, i.e., the manifestations of a plebeian soul.

On the contrary, we know that Nietzsche attributes to the morals of the aristocratic man the capacity to “say yes” to life and to express positive attitudes and feelings: self-respect, disposition to give, magnanimity, courage and esteeming one’s opponents, in short, all those features that distinguish a “strong” from a “weak” man. Thus the strong man can face all experience displaying a “ludic sense of danger”, opening up to what is new and unknown without being paralysed by the ethical conformism that can be summed up in the words “conventional morality” (*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*).

The task of accepting life in the full requires a rule different from that of traditional morals. In the work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche formulates this rule as “fidelity to the earth”, which is an imperative that reveals an overall new measure for humanity, both from the theoretical and the practical points of view. It requires the demolition of the dualistic vision of reality and its unjust hierarchies. On the level of knowledge, the self-sufficient position of universal concepts collapses, the abstract exercise of judgement is overcome; even more, and especially, the latter’s claim to deduce from itself or to generate what belongs to life. The Nietzschean criticism regards the whole Western metaphysical tradition that stretches from Socrates to Schopenhauer from this point of view (although on a less superficial and more analytical reading, various evaluations are in evidence, especially as regards the Greek philosophers).

This does not mean that Nietzsche, in spite of his invitation not to judge — as expressed, for example, in the work *Human, All-Too-Human* — declares the activity of judging to be completely over. This would be impossible: On the contrary, however, impure and incomplete and, therefore, illogical, judgement cannot be eliminated from the human horizon. At the core of the activity of judging there certainly lies a paradox, i.e., the paradox of not possessing fixed and complete measures by which to express a global judgement regarding others and the relation of anything to us.

However, though lacking a fixed and complete measure, judging is intimately linked to the act of living. In fact, as we recognise in *Human All-Too-Human* (Aphorism 32: *It is necessary, to be unjust*) we cannot live without judging in the original and radical meaning of the term, i.e., without “feeling aversions or inclinations.” By expressing in the very act of living, feelings of aversion or inclination, we cannot but judge. The drive towards something or against something is closely associated with the feeling of “wanting what is good and avoiding what is harmful” and, in short, there is in

man no drive without "some sort of cognitive appreciation of the value of our aim."

Therefore, judging does not disappear at all in Nietzsche, even in the works where his criticism seems to be at its strongest. We acknowledge it has a quality which is far from being abstractly logical and consequently find it firmly rooted in the manifestation of life. In other words, we recognise the illogical nature of judgement and its partiality. This is exactly the reason why we can attribute it to life. In this way, judgement has from the start a practical relevance. If judging and evaluating are guidelines in life, they operate by enabling us to select from its manifold possibilities. They identify the measures by which life traces its own tracks, since life collects everything but is never given in its entirety. The need for a measure is even stronger for individual lives. In fact, if each of us followed his own instincts and wishes, would we not give ourselves up to the impossibility of acting and therefore of living? In order not to suffocate itself, life requires measure and a capacity for self-restriction.

3. EVALUATING POWER THROUGH INDIVIDUAL MEASURES

This analysis can be better developed by introducing the notion of power. Power is the original force that looks for fulfillment in everyone and in every action. Its increase coincides with happiness. It being the basic structure of every action, it pervades everything. Therefore, at least superficially, it represents the key to describing any way of existing. In fact power is also expressed in the attitudes of traditional morals. Even the resentful man tries to achieve power, and so does the man who looks for sympathy or is devoted to asceticism.

Here we meet a great difficulty that we may call an *aporia of power*. If power coincides with any form of life and gathers in itself all the moments of existence, does not the concept of it end up in a mere acceptance of whatever happens in any way that it happens? All this would turn power into an all-inclusive concept that leads to indifference towards the ways and content of its expressions. But if such a semantic levelling was inevitable, how could we expect from a reference to power the capacity to point out which experiences can more effectively achieve it? In short, if all is a realisation of power, nothing truly is. How then, on top of it all, could power clearly signal the way to achieve happiness? How can we escape this *aporia*? In order to avoid having innumerable differences in power which are indifferent as to their value, we must admit that not all experiences are equally suited to the idea of power.

Among the many ways through which power manifests itself, there are some which suit the idea of power better. It is a question, then, of giving more stress, in reading the Nietzschean discourse, to a need for *evaluating* the aspects of power. Once again we must introduce a criterion for judgement. This cannot be extrinsic to the actual manifestation of power, however. To subdue power to a power superior to itself would disregard the Nietzschean criticism of the dualistic vision of reality. Power must find in itself the measure of its own evaluation and discover in itself the illustrations of its excellence achieved.

But can such a measure be univocally determined? How could we ignore that, according to Nietzsche, “the centre is everywhere” and that consequently we should not speak of constraints given *a priori* for all of us? The exclusion of a single and absolute measure of power, however, makes the individual search for power possible. Thus there appears the horizon of an individual science of power, capable of calculating its forces and their distribution according to the style of a new wisdom.

This is the ground for a morality at a remove from traditional morality. The morality we can find in Nietzsche rejects an absolute measure for acting. In fact, not *one* measure is given but many. This does not imply, however, that we must renounce giving some sense to acting, falling into a sort of “horrid adventitiousness” and consequently into the nonachievement of any goal. When Nietzsche abandons the great monolithic concepts – such as good/evil, unselfishness/selfishness – he does not open a gaping hole where all reference points are lost. Absolute polarity aggregating the meanings of acting is superseded by a polarity that focuses on the individual, who does not merely have the task of *deconstructing* the traditional models for acting but must also take on that of searching or *inventing* more valid courses of action. The individual is asked to develop a responsible *creativity*.

In order to follow this directive the individual will have to marry the pursuit of the arrangements which are most suited to power to more flexible and pliable criteria than those of abstractly moral standards. Measure is, then, the capacity to decline power within life contexts which must be fully acknowledged and fulfilled.

4. ANALYSIS OF MEASURE IN THE *DAYBREAK*

Nietzsche has supplied us with penetrating and subtle analyses of the search for measure, particularly in the pages of *Daybreak*. Beyond the high-sounding proclamations advocating the abolition of morals, we meet a

type of reflexion that does not use solemn tones but which we might call a sort of *microconceptualization*, i.e., an art of thinking that patiently outlines new equilibriums in the structure of action. When exploring the reasons for acting we must undoubtedly give our utmost attention to the plurality of the forces at play, overcoming the clear-cut oppositions typical of abstract moral thought. Psychological inquiry, the probing of states of mind, is more effective than any classification based on antitheses. Thus, in Aphorism 133 of *Daybreak* (*No longer thinking of oneself*), which brings forth the theme of *sympathy* and criticises Schopenhauer's position on it, Nietzsche shows how sympathy cannot be opposed in an absolute way to the expression of one's own personal power.

The man who dives into the water after someone who has fallen in before his very eyes, for example, does not do so merely as an abstract application of sympathy wherein his own self is not at all involved. In actuality, Nietzsche admonishes us, compassion for the other is always mixed with the unconscious feeling that the misfortune of the other is also an offence to ourselves and, therefore, it would convict us of our helplessness, or even our cowardice, if we did not offer our help. If, then, the attitude of compassion towards the other always involves the assertion of our power, in the same way that the act of bringing help always gives satisfaction to the one who brings it, it is simply not the case that in order to account for compassion, a clear demarcation between unselfishness and selfishness must be drawn. Compassion is rather a "polyphonic reality" that does not lend itself to exhaustive explanation by only one term. Consequently, evaluation is not so much an exercise framing our actions within rigid or exclusive bounds, which would impoverish their substantial character, but rather an acknowledgement of the richness of the vital aspects constituting them.

5. AUTONOMY AND RELATION WITH THE OTHER IN OUR ACTIONS

However, the conceptual deconstruction Nietzsche has carried out to account for the complexity of human actions comes with precise methodological directions. These concern primarily authenticity and coherence in action. At the beginning of Book Three in *Daybreak*, in Aphorism 149 (*Small acts of anticonformism are necessary*), Nietzsche considers the capacity of anticonformism in the actual small acts of life as the way to achieve a measure for acting which is centred on the individual and on the responsible making of his choices and decisions. Anticonformism is not meant to be banal transgression, but emancipation from conventional morals on the basis

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