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Philosophy of History
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10 October 2007

History, Guilt and Future

I saw a shirt the other day that had a picture of several Native Americans on horseback with the text reading, “Homeland Security: Defending against terrorism since 1492.” How should I as a European-descended citizen of the United States react to this account of history? The same could be asked when presented with the histories of the merciless Crusades, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Nazi Germany, Rwanda and the Gulf Wars. The reaction that is most common is that of regret, shame, or guilt. If we look at Friedrich Nietzsche and the 20th century theologian Jürgen Moltmann, we will find two different ideas of why we experience guilt. Interestingly though, both Nietzsche and Moltmann will use the language of redemption, hope and future in their accounts of history and guilt.

In the essay “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and the Like”, Nietzsche analyzes the German *schuld* (the word can be translated in English as both guilt and debt). He states the the “moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debts].”¹ The relationship between the creditor and debtor is the basis of our feelings of guilt. The debtor made a promise and failed to keep it and thus owes the creditor money or some other duty. Let’s look at the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* by Dee Brown. The reader begins to feel as though they owe the American Indians something as though

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 62-3.

they are her debtors.² Nietzsche argues that this feeling of debt or guilt is actually a pathology that has grown throughout the ages and is similar to the pains of pregnancy that will eventually come to a climactic end. The ideal person for Nietzsche is an autonomous individual. The feeling of guilt assumes a sort of master-slave relationship. I say “sort of” because the typical slave does not chose to become a slave. In Dee Brown’s account, he does not say to the reader, “You are responsible for this tragedy and there is nothing you can do to make things right.” The reader or observer of history voluntarily feels this way and creates this bad conscience within herself.

Before Moltmann joins our discussion, there needs to be some comments on the relationship between philosophy of history and theologians. The study of history reveals the complexities of human nature and actions. Good and evil actions coexist.³ Being a theologian presupposes the belief in God. Typically, God is described as having the characteristics of omniscience, omnipotence and goodness. Thus the problem of evil: How could a God that is all-good allow evil to happen when s/he has the power and the knowledge to stop it? Theologians have used a speculative philosophy of history to help answer the problem of evil. The reasoning follows that if there is a grand purpose to all of human history, then one could step back from the immediacy of Wounded Knee, and get the “God’s-eye” view of the whole of human history.

I chose to discuss Jürgen Moltmann’s view because he writes in the aftermath of World War II, and because he has a particularly interesting view of Christian history and eschatology.

² This highlights the problem of agency in history. It seems much more natural to say that it was Senator Dawes, Red Cloud, et. al. who were the agents of action. But if the reader responds with a feeling of guilt then they are assuming a much broader idea of agency to include themselves in the events of the 19th century.

³ Nietzsche would argue that the we need to get rid of the categories of good and evil in the first place.

Moltmann's basic conception of God is that he is a God of promise. What this means is that whenever God reveals himself, he does it in the form of a promise. Such as the Abrahamic covenant in which God promises to make Abraham into a great nation. The promise is always of a reality that is to come. Christ taught his disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Moltmann sees the entirety of the Christian narrative as being that of promise and its future fulfillment. History is the working out of these promises. "[Historical events] do not then have only the accidental, individual and relative character which we normally ascribed to historic events, but then they have always at the same time also an unfinished and provisional character that points forwards."⁴ If God is a God of promise, then history is an indirect self-revelation of God. So when we experience the feeling of guilt after studying the massacre at Wounded Knee, it is because of the unfulfilled promise. Moltmann says, "the goad of the promised future stabs in exorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."⁵

How does one deal with guilt? One way that Nietzsche suggests how people cope is to forget. Forgetting is not passive, but a positive action to get rid of the guilt that one feels. There are obvious examples of this in how history is recorded. The old saying goes that it is the victor that writes the history. Thus anything that the victor does not want recorded does not get recorded. It is forgotten. Moltmann suggests that one can choose either hope or despair. Hope, for Moltmann, is not idle complacency. He says,

in [hope's] eyes the world is full of all kinds of possibilities, namely all the possibilities of the God of hope. It sees reality and mankind in the hand of him whose voice calls into

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1967), p 107.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 21.

history from its end, saying, 'Behold, I make all things new', and from hearing this word of promise it acquires the freedom to renew life here and to change the face of the world.⁶

From this one can see why Moltmann is considered the father of liberation theology. The experience of guilt is used as a reminder of the promise of God, and the inspiration to change the world for the better.

The Native Indians at Wounded Knee were followers of a new apocalyptic religion called The Ghost Dance. The origins come from their experience of the failed promises of the "white man" and their God's own promise for their restoration and the renewal of the land. Here in a different language of faith, hope in the restoration of broken promises is central to their interpretation of history and future.

Interestingly, Nietzsche employs similar language at the end of his essay on guilt. He talks of the "redeeming man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit," that will bring about "the redemption from the curse that the hitherto reigning ideal has laid upon it."⁷ The "curse" for Nietzsche is the experience of guilt or the bad conscience. He concludes by saying:

this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness -- *he must come one day.* --⁸

Nietzsche is careful to avoid the use of religion in his answer, but he does employ the language of religion.

As an observer of history there will inevitably come times when she experiences guilt. This experience has led thinkers as opposed as Nietzsche and Moltmann to reach similar

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷ Nietzsche, p. 96.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 96.

conclusions. There needs to be a future redemption or restoration. So either it is true that there will be a future restoration, or humanity psychologically needs a future hope (I think that this can be an inclusive use of 'or'). As to the latter, that seems to be the work of psychologists. As for the former, any argument for or against is an argument from ignorance. In the meantime there must be honest historians who do not gloss over the "evils" of human history and let the reader work it out herself.