NIETZSCHE, BATAILLE AND ATHEISTIC SIN

ALAIN WATT

PAUL RICOEUR once suggested that 'sin' presupposes a "atheistic" perspective,[1] arguing that the notion of sin is dependent on the idea of being "before God". A Covenant exists between God and man, and sin arises when man breaks the Covenant (as Adam and Eve did paradigmatically by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil despite God's prohibition). If this is correct, then it would appear that 'sin' should not be a concept to concern the atheist, for if there is no God then *a fortiori* there is no Covenant and *a fortiori* there can be no breaking of the Covenant (sin). However, both Nietzsche and Bataille, two avowed atheists, have shown a good deal of interest in 'sin', an interest which requires some explanation in the light of Ricoeur's claim. Are they simply commenting on sin as critical outside observers? Are they perhaps less 'atheistic' than would at first sight appear? Is Ricoeur's observation incorrect? Or should we say that there is a separate 'atheistic' type of sin to be set alongside 'theistic' sin? This paper explores the role 'sin' plays in Nietzsche and Bataille with these questions in mind; as we will see, the story is a complex one, in that all of the above suggestions for how to resolve the apparent contradiction of 'atheistic sin' have some plausibility. As well as this primary aim of trying to determine in what sense 'sin' can be important to atheists, I also have a secondary aim of questioning the alignment of Nietzsche and Bataille on this issue. I hope to show that Bataille's thinking on sin marks a more radical departure from the Judaeo-Christian heritage than does Nietzsche's; it is only with Bataille that we find an atheist who really "revalues the value" of sin.[2]

This paper is organised into three parts. The first two concentrate on Nietzsche's treatment of sin, which I have subdivided into "negative" and "positive". By "negative" I mean his critique of the role sin plays in Judaeo-Christianity, outlined primarily in *The Antichrist*. By "positive" I mean the role 'sin' plays in the construction of Nietzsche's own philosophical system, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in particular and in scattered comments elsewhere. There is some tension between these positive and negative aspects, which makes the (re)construction of "Nietzsche on sin" a rather complex business. Then in the third and final part of the paper, I outline Bataille's views of sin, somewhat more briefly. I conclude by trying to draw

[1] Ricoeur: *The Symbolism of Evil.* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), p51.

[2] The notion of a "revaluation of values" is of course a central Nietzschean theme.

together the various parts of the discussion to give an overview of what "atheistic sin" might look like.

NIETZSCHE AGAINST "CHRISTIAN SIN"

The obvious place to begin an account of Nietzsche on sin is with his critique of what sin has meant under (Judaeo-)Christianity. The general tenor of his remarks on sin is captured in a striking passage in *The Antichrist*:

> From a psychological point of view, "sins" are indispensable in any society organized by priests: they are the actual levers of power, the priest lives on sins, he needs "the commission of sins" ... Supreme law: "God forgives him who repents" – in plain language: *who subjects himself to the priest*.[3]

The use of scare-quotes around the word "sin" – very frequent in Nietzsche's use of the term – indicates that he finds the very concept highly suspect. In other places he talks of 'the invention of sin'[4] by the priest: the term, it seems, does not name some pre-existent reality, but is rather part of a campaign to *forge a new reality* more conducive to the priest's requirements. The logic behind this campaign is clear: if people believe that priests are needed to intercede between themselves and God then a relationship of dependency will be created. Sin, as Nietzsche sees it, is thus 'a distancing relationship between God and man'[5]; it establishes a space, which only the priest can fill. And it introduces a peculiar kind of spiritual suffering, which cannot be cured by a doctor: 'Man ... shall *suffer* ... And he shall suffer in such a way that he has need of the priest at all times. – Away with physicians! *One has need of a Saviour*.'[6]

It is interesting to note that Nietzsche absolves Jesus himself of any responsibility for promoting this logic of sin: he had no comprehension of such power games. For Nietzsche's Jesus the key concept was rather "blessedness", which was not something promised in the after-life (Nietzsche sees in this later Christian doctrine an outrageous abuse of the idea), but rather something in the here-and-now, available to anyone who becomes completely open, non-resistant, "loving" towards all other forces, even hostile ones. "The redeemer", as Nietzsche describes him, no longer required any formulas, any rites for communicating with God - not even

---

[3] Nietzsche, F.: *Twilight of the Idols/ The Antichrist*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968) *A*, #26.

[4] *Ibid.*, #49.

[5] *Ibid.*, #33

[6] *Ibid.*, #49

prayer. He has settled his accounts with the whole Jewish penance-and-reconciliation doctrine; he knows that it is through the practice of one's life that one feels "divine", "blessed", "evangelic", at all times "a child of God". It is *not* penance, *not* "prayer for forgiveness" which leads to God: evangelic practice alone leads to God, it *is* God! What was abolished with the Evangel was the Judaism of the concepts "sin", "forgiveness of sin", "faith", "redemption by faith" - the whole of Jewish ecclesiastical teaching was denied in the "glad tidings."[7]

Paul and the Church fathers, however, reinstated these "Jewish ecclesiastical" concepts with a vengeance, restoring the distance between man and God which Jesus's life and teaching had denied; and they did this not least by raising Jesus himself into a God, and one who had sacrificed himself for man's sake. Paul is fingered as the engineer of this profound shift: by focussing on Jesus's death and (fictitious) resurrection, he twisted the meaning of "the redeemer" into one who promises resurrection-after-death for our "immortal soul", rather than one who shows us a path to blessedness in *this* life.[8] And of course sin then once again plays a vital role: it is the threat to our "salvation" and we must seek God's grace (mediated through the priest, of course), hoping that He will see fit to forgive us and grant us our entry ticket to heaven.

As the tone of some of the above citations indicates, Nietzsche does not occupy a neutral position in relation to the story he tells. Jesus is discussed respectfully, whereas every kind of vitriol is poured onto Paul and the disciples. While it would be going too far to say that Nietzsche entirely identifies with Jesus,[9] his sympathies clearly lie in that direction. At any rate, it would appear from his critique of Judaeo-Christianity in the *Antichrist* that he could have no truck with sin, for quite apart from the fact that there is no God for Nietzsche (against whom one could sin), he objects *ethically* to sin, too. It is deconstructed as one of the priest's tools to gain control over his "flock", and the self-abasement it encourages renders people unready for the great (self-)creative tasks Nietzsche proposes for them. And yet despite all this, there is clear evidence that Nietzsche in places makes positive use of "sin" and related ideas. In the next section I try to reconstruct this "positive" role and ask how (on Earth) it can be squared with his condemnation of Judaeo-Christian "sin".

---

[7] *Ibid.*, #33.

[8] See Nietzsche: *The Antichrist*, #39-40.

[9] The latter is seen as a "holy fool" and completely non-heroic because he knows no kind of struggle (he does not resist anything or anyone). This clearly does not fit with Nietzsche's frequently bellicose rhetoric and his oft-repeated injunction to "*become hard*!"

I have to preface the following discussion with an acknowledgement that Nietzsche nowhere outlines a positive case for deploying "sin" within the framework of his philosophy: where he *reflects* on "sin" and its uses, it is in order to condemn it. Nevertheless, ideas of sin do play an active role in a few places in his work, and I will argue in what follows that its role in his thinking is not insubstantial.

As mentioned above, one obvious problem with attributing to Nietzsche a positive sense of "sin" is that this would seem to require a God, which he of course denies. On the Ricoeurian view, what transforms an act from something merely "wrong" into a "sin" is the idea that it is inconsistent with duties we have *to God*, and not just to other human beings. But what about something analagous to God? In Zarathustra's opening speech to the crowd in the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we find the following passage:

> "Once transgression [*Frevel*] against God was the greatest transgression, but God died, and thereupon those offenders [*Frevelhaften*] died too. To transgress against the Earth is now the most terrible offence..."[10]

Here there is a quite explicit parallel between "transgression against God" and "transgression against the Earth". "The Earth" is, quite literally, a substitute for "God", in this sentence at least. Moreover, a few lines earlier Zarathustra has entreated his listeners: "remain faithful (*treu*) to the Earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes". This clearly has echoes of the first commandment – though of course the faith in question is an inversion of Judaeo-Christianity, which is based on "superterrestrial hopes". Thus it appears that there could be a duty for Nietzsche equivalent to the basic Judaic-Christian duty to God, which would makes it possible to talk of "sin" (when one fails in this duty). In Nietzsche's case, though, it would be "the Earth" or "Life"[11] which we must remain faithful to – and indeed "love".[12]

---

[10] Nietzsche, F.: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1961), Prologue, #3. I have amended the translation here as Hollingdale's "blasphemy" does not accurately capture the broader meaning of "*Frevel*".

[11] In several passages the terms are used almost interchangeably, e.g. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Of the despisers of the body", where Nietzsche criticises those who are "angry with life and with the earth".

[12] The emphasis on love clearly brings Nietzsche closer to specifically Christian ideas. E.g. 'It is worthwhile to live on earth: one day, one festival with Zarathustra has taught me to love the Earth.' Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The Intoxicated Song", #I.

But what does "remaining faithful to the Earth" mean? And how could we "sin" against the Earth? Much later in *Zarathustra,* Nietzsche suggests that "pity for the higher man" might constitute the "ultimate sin" for Zarathustra.[13] Nietzsche elsewhere explains that pity counts as a sin for Zarathustra because it tempts him to abandon his own path in order to minister to those around him who are suffering.[14] Those capable of great things must beware the danger of becoming infected by the misery of suffering humanity, becoming miserable themselves, and thereby losing their ability to carry out great tasks – which they must do because "they alone are our *warranty* for the future, they alone are *liable* for the future of man."[15] The greatest threat that Nietzsche sees facing humanity is

> that man should inspire not profound fear but profound *nausea*; also not great fear but great *pity*. Suppose these two were one day to unite, they would inevitably beget one of the uncanniest monsters: the "last will" of man, his will to nothingness, to nihilism.[16]

Where there is "will to nothingness" there is no longer love of the Earth: those infected by nausea and pity can no longer affirm life.[17]

Nietzsche's story is thus a complex one: to remain "true to the Earth" one must not merely reject the siren calls of those peddling "otherworldly hopes". The rejection of a transcendent God is *part* of what is required, but it is by no means enough in itself. There must be a positive embrace of *this* life and the earth we live on: it must be embraced the way it truly is. By extension the formula for Nietzschean "sin" would be: rejection of this life and the world as it really is. This occurs when people are miserable, suffering, vengeful; and so the great "redemptive" task is to be able to accept this life and this Earth for what they are, to *know* them, and still to love them.

But if sin is playing such an important role in Nietzsche's thinking, does this make him a kind of theist, albeit with a very different kind of "God"? Such an interpretation of course runs up against many textual difficulties.

---

[13] *Ibid.*, "The Sign".

[14] Nietzsche, F.: *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1979), "Why I am so Wise", #4.

[15] Nietzsche, F.: *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), III, #14.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] It is worth noting that the two key sources of sin - disgust and pity - are not responses to the same phenomenon, but rather have in turn two heterogenous sources. Disgust is likely to be felt towards the "last man" or "rabble", whereas "pity" is for the "Higher Men", as the passage from "The Sign" indicates (see also Nietzsche's confession concerning "my kind of pity" in *The Will to Power* (trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage, 1967), #367.

Apart from Nietzsche's famous insistence that "God is dead", he also has Zarathustra ask rhetorically: "what would there be to create if gods – existed?"[18] If, as is sometimes thought, Nietzsche's doctrine centres around an unguided (self-)creativity, it is certainly difficult to see how "sin" could play much of a role, for whatever one created would be good. But then it is also hard to understand on what basis he could launch his attack on Christianity, since according to his own interpretation it is a highly "creative" religion, having invented its concepts out of vapours of the imagination. I would suggest therefore that Nietzsche is not just about "creating" – this would make him too much like an existentialist; there is always something else which should guide creativity, and this further criterion could be summarised as Life/Earth and the Covenant "remain true to the Earth". A creativity which does not do this, which turns to other worlds for its inspiration, is "sinful", on my reading of Nietzsche. I'm not sure if this is enough to make of him a theist, but I think that the cat*ego*ry of the sacred remains potent in his thinking: "Life" is sacred for him, especially when understood in Dionysian terms as the "eternal recurrence" of life from out of death. Life understood and experienced in this way *should be* sufficient to redeem all earthly suffering.[19]

But if I am right about this quasi-religious nature of Nietzsche's positive use of "sin", how can this possibly be squared with his trenchant critique of Judaeo-Christian sin? Why should we not be as sceptical of his use of "sin" as he is of the priest's? A possible response is that there are certain important structural differences in Nietzsche's treatment which may allow him to avoid the brunt of his own criticism. One of Nietzsche's major criticisms is the "false causality" that is involved in Judaic-Christian sin, in other words that suffering is presumed to be God's punishment for an individual's – or humanity's – sins. Nietzsche's more naturalistic approach entails that he sees "sin" as *subsequent*, not anterior to suffering and misery. He frequently talks in quasi-medical terms of "infection" with misery which then causes people to slander life (i.e. to sin). Ideally, then, the response should be to help them to *convalesce*; and much of his work – *Zarathustra* in particular – may be read in this light. He tries to show what attitudes and acts constitute "being faithful to the earth", what "sicknesses" threaten it, and how one may be "cured" of them. Thus we can say that Nietzsche's conception of sin is importantly different from the Biblical conception in that there is no parallel to the idea that we will be punished

[18] Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On the Blissful Islands".

[19] See in particular Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1052, which constitutes his most explicit and passionate exposition of this principle.

for our sins. There are no threats connected to the Nietzschean account, only exhortations.

Nevertheless, even if we can plausibly claim that the Judaeo-Christian sin Nietzsche critiques in *The Antichrist* is not exactly the same conception as the one he puts to work in *Zarathustra*, his positive use of sin does jar with some of the more extreme formulations in his critique, particularly his suggestion that sin is simply an "invention" of the priest and 'that form *par excellence* of the self-violation of man'.[20] For elsewhere he clearly sees it as a concept marking an important psychological reality; he makes use of "sin"; and he warns against its dangers. We can even reconstruct *what* Nietzsche sees as sinful: in general terms denial of "the Earth"; more particularly, "pity" (for higher men) and "nausea" (in the face of the mediocre herd).

Thus it seems that what Nietzsche finds objectionable is not really "sin as such" but rather the *content* of Christian sin. At the structural level Nietzsche, too, has an idea of the defilement of man (sin); and evidently he does not believe that *his* notion of sin involves "self-violation"; rather it is (for Nietzsche) a necessary step towards redemption that the individual recognises his sins and seeks ways of purifying himself of them.

It would appear, then, that we have two rival views, both of which have a role for sin as *that which is hostile to Life*. For Christianity, Life resides in the soul and in an otherworldly God; for Nietzsche, Life is rooted in the body and the Earth. For both, "sin" keeps us at a distance from Life, and our ultimate goal must be to somehow overcome sin, and find ourselves reunited with Life. Locating Life in different places means that Nietzsche and Judaeo-Christianity are rivals, competitors for the guidance of the human spirit. But at any rate they are agreed that "sin" is the ultimately bad, that which we must make every effort to fight, resist, and purge.

Even this minimum "common denominator" is brought into question, however, when we consider Bataille's views on sin. For he believes that this understanding of sin as the ultimately bad and the to-be-avoided-at-all-costs is in itself part of the Judaeo-Christian heritage; according to Bataille, it breaks with the role that sin played in more ancient pagan religions. If this is true, then Nietzsche is more deeply embroiled within the Christian schema than he realised. In the next section of my paper I give a brief exegesis of Bataille's position on sin, before making some general remarks in conclusion.

---

[20] Nietzsche: *The Antichrist*, #49.

Bataille identifies a profound problem with Christianity: it has 'misunderstood the sanctity of transgression'.[21] This problem is evident in the central depiction of transgression within Christian mythology, the crucifixion:

> Essentially in the idea of the sacrifice upon the Cross the very character of transgression has been altered...It is a transgression in the sense that it is of course a sin, and of all sins indeed the gravest. But in transgression as I have described it sin, if sin there is...[is] the consequence of a resolute and intentional act...[whereas] the sin of the crucifixion is disallowed by the priest celebrating the sacrifice of the mass. The fault lies in the blindness of the authors of the deed and we are bound to think that they would not have committed it if only they had known.[22]

According to Bataille, pre-Christian religion celebrated transgression (sin). While taboos existed to regulate the profane world, religious rites involved a (limited) transgression of the taboo. Bataille understands this according to his schema of continuity/discontinuity: human beings long for the continuity of being which as individuated beings they lack; in death and sexual ecstasy they lose their discontinuity and return to the continuous. Now, although human beings desire this continuity, they also fear it; moreover it is incompatible with the world of work. Thus there is a central duality in life between the profane world in which people act to further their own individual interests, and the religious world in which continuity may be regained, at least symbolically. Achieving continuity involves violating the taboo, involves "sin", but this is accepted as a central part of life; there is no question of being "redeemed" or cleansed of sin.

Christianity's error, then, is to seek to exclude the positive force of transgression from religion and to see sin instead as a "falling away" from God.

At the pagan stage religion was based on transgression and the impure aspects were no less divine than the opposite ones. The realm of sacred things is composed of the pure and the impure. Christianity rejected impurity. It rejected guilt without which sacredness is impossible since only the violation of a taboo can open the way to it.[23]

Thus as Bataille sees it sin is necessary to religion not cynically, as Nietzsche interprets Christianity's use of it; nor again as a threat we have to overcome, as it still is for Nietzsche; but rather as a part of the religious rite itself, as a gateway to continuity.

---

[21] Bataille, G.: *Eroticism*, trans. M. Dalwood, (London: Marion Boyars, 1962), p 90.
[22] *Ibid.*, pp89-90.
[23] *Ibid.*, pp120-1.

If Bataille is right about this, then Nietzsche suffers from a similar problem as does Christianity. For he, too, rejects guilt and impurity. It would appear that the "revaluer of all values" has a blind spot, for his criticism of Christianity is that it *entrenches* human guilt-feelings while pretending to offer a way to overcome guilt. He certainly does not entertain Bataille's idea that the *value* of becoming "pure", "free of guilt" etc. should be challenged. In this sense the apparent paganism of Nietzsche's relocation of the divine in "the Earth" is misleading, for to the extent that his story still involves the "cleansing of sin and guilt" as central elements it remains very Christian.

CONCLUSIO: ATHEISTIC SIN

I will conclude by returning to the questions I posed at the outset: how is it possible for an atheist to talk about sin? And, assuming it is possible, what form can such "atheistic sin" take? Based on the examination I have conducted of Nietzsche and Bataille's use of "sin" I can outline three main responses to this question.

First, an atheist can – indeed in principle must – offer a rival, naturalistic account of the concept of "sin" employed by theists. Both Nietzsche and Bataille do this, though here as in other important respects their accounts diverge significantly from one another. Whereas Nietzsche offers an essentially cynical account of "sin" as a tool of priestly power, Bataille presents a more neutral, anthropological account of sin as one element in a taboo-transgression pairing which is a cornerstone of human society. Either way it is possible to give meaning to "sin" without reference to God, but in such a way that Ricoeur's dictum is not contradicted – for he surely meant that sin *as a lived experience* requires God, and so long as the "psychologist" Nietzsche or "anthropologist" Bataille is merely directing his professorial attention to the subject he is not experiencing it in this way; indeed, by demythologising it, he could be said to participate in its destruction.

As we have seen, however, this is not all that Nietzsche and Bataille do with "sin"; for it also plays an active role in both thinkers' own evaluative systems, and in so far as it does so Ricoeur's dictum *is* contradicted. "Sin" is possible as a normative concept for them because, unusually among atheists, their denial of God does not entail a denial of the sacred realm; I would argue, indeed, that for both Nietzsche and Bataille the attempt to rescue religion (or at least certain valuable elements of it) from the

consuming fire of God's death is an important aspect of their philosophical project.[24] In Bataille's case, this follows fairly straightforwardly from his naturalistic account of sin in existing religions: he simply universalises the taboo-transgression motif, seeing it as constitutive, not merely of particular societies, but of the human condition as such. In Nietzsche's case, on the other hand, serious tensions exist between the condemnation of Judaeo-Christian "sin" and his own positive deployment of the concept. To an extent these can be resolved by emphasising that Nietzsche's own use of "sin" detaches it from "punishment" and makes of it a quasi-medical condition, thereby avoiding some of the most trenchant criticisms made in *The Antichrist*; nevertheless, it seems clear that Nietzsche does not consistently believe his own assertion that sin is an "invention". On my reading, his prime reason for disliking Judaeo-Christian sin (apart from the connection it makes with divine punishment) is that it stigmatises *the wrong things*.

The third main point about "atheistic sin" is that it is not a single possibility but, analogously to its theistic counterpart, will vary in nature and function according to the "atheistic religion" of which it forms an element. Comparing Nietzsche and Bataille we see that they differ not simply on the question "what counts as sin" but on the more fundamental question of what *value* sin should have within their system. Bataille's radical idea that sin (transgression) is a *necessary* part of religion, that one must break as well as keep the taboo, diverges from Nietzsche as much as from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, since both of them regard sin (mistakenly in Bataille's view) as that which must be excluded and avoided. While it would be going beyond the scope of this paper to enter into debate about "who is right", it would seem that Bataille has at any rate undertaken the Nietzschean task of "revaluing the value" of sin more thoroughly than Nietzsche himself. Indeed, in seeking (albeit on very different terms) freedom from sin and the eradication of impurity, the arch-enemy of Christianity remains curiously Christian.

---

[24] Elsewhere for instance I have shown that Nietzsche is preoccupied with the problem of theodicy. See Watt, A., "Nietzsche's theodicy", *New Nietzsche Studies* 4, nos. 3-4 (2000-1): 45-54.