
BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: RELIGION AND MORALITY IN THE THOUGHT OF NIETZSCHE, ZEN BUDDHISM AND JORDAN PETERSON

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the proximate relation between religion and morality through the shared features of the philosophy of F. Nietzsche, Zen Buddhism, and the psychologist Jordan Peterson. Peterson associates the concept of multiple hierarchies in the evolution of life and society to the behavior of lobsters, also drawing from religion, psychology, and Nietzsche's thought. While finding a common theme between Eastern and Western philosophy appears difficult if we follow Peterson's concept of an *ethos*, this study will reveal that transcendence as self-overcoming is a dominant idea that can be found in all three perspectives.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Zen, Peterson, Self-overcoming, Ethos

Introduction

What does it mean to be human? How can man rise above himself? What is the relation between evolution and truth? Are morals built upon a longer historical process? What is truth? In what truth is religion rooted? These important questions often draw our attention into the structure of an *ethos* that determines for us the meaning of human life. In pursuing the connection between the Eastern and Western views of the self, this paper will put into contrast the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche, Zen Buddhism, and the psychologist Jordan Peterson. The focus of this investigation is the latter, who offers an insight by making an association between the human *ethos* and biology. Peterson begins his book, *12 Rules for Life: The Antidote to Chaos*, by citing the relevance of the study of lobsters to his concept of multiple hierarchies:

If you are like most people, you don't often think about lobsters – unless you're eating one. However, these interesting... crustaceans are very much worth considering. Their nervous system is comparatively simple, with large, easily observable neurons, the magic cells of the brain. Because of this, scientists have been able to map the neural circuitry of lobsters very accurately. This has helped us understand the structure and function of the brain and behavior of more complex animals, including human beings.¹

Peterson sees a proximity between the behavior of lobsters and the character of humans. Like lobsters, human beings struggle to reach the apex of a hierarchy. To survive, Peterson says that human beings must be assertive. Humans have a natural ability to climb up into dominant positions. Inequalities for Peterson are not necessarily wrong. For him, the presence of inequalities in society simply means that some have the competence to rise above others. Societies, he thinks, would not survive without multiple hierarchies. The ability to lead and pursue novelty is more powerful than any type of ideology which for Peterson only

retrogress humanity. Against the anomalous conception of history by socialism, Peterson believes that the source of the *ethos* of human survival is evolutionary.

As such, the individual must understand himself through the constant questioning of both the ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ territories of human existence. Things in the cosmos change beyond the control of the individual. Man is put into that type of conflict in which one part of his life is placed comfortably in a ‘world of order’ and another in the ‘reality of chaos’. The depth of this view was explored by Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s position appeals to Greek mythology to explain the Apollonian and Dionysian elements in man, the two conflicting forces that compose the human spirit. For Nietzsche, the meaning of life comes from the fateful unity of the two. To survive the nihilism of our time, Nietzsche proclaims the ‘death of God’ so that man can reconstruct his moral values.

The Will to Meaning

Zen Buddhism manifests the desire for meaning through ‘transcendence’. Transcendence for Zen is about the ‘ineffable’. It is beyond *logos*. To overcome the self, man must stop the self-destruction caused by the negation of human existence. Zen Buddhism proposes going beyond dualistic thinking. The essence of reality is ‘affirmation’. This ultimately constitutes the meaning of self-realization. Zen Buddhism is grounded, according to Alfredo Co, in the assertion that, “all reasoning must be destroyed and a new form of consciousness that defies logic must be realized.”²² Zen, by description, goes beyond the empirical. It prevails over ordinary reason. Christmas Humphreys says that, “Zen is beyond discussion and is beyond the sway of opposites by which all description and argument are carried on.”²³

Peterson has formulated a similar trajectory.⁴ Firstly, he attacks the idea of nihilism in *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. The idea of nihilism is that ‘movement into nothingness’ wherein the nihilist attitude rejects any framework of value. For Peterson, human beings are oriented towards a hierarchy of values. Human finitude, in this case,

suggests that while life is suffering, the more fundamental truth of human life is that man is in pursuit of the meaning of life. Man is responsible for the meaning of his life. This meaning dwells in the ability of the individual to find his place in the world. This is what ‘transcendence’ all about. Peterson says that man prepares himself for meaning and makes the ‘unknown’ as motivation.⁵

For Nietzsche, the principles and values of Christianity has wrongly defined for individuals their moral world. The thinker assails Christianity, branding it as a form of “slave morality”. He despises not only the religion, but also the institution which he considers as corrupt. Nietzsche writes in *The Anti-Christ*: **“All the ideas of the church are now recognized for what they are as the worst counterfeits in existence, invented to debase nature and all-natural value.”**⁶ **In this way, Nietzsche thinks of religious men as usurers and Christianity “the religion of pity.”**⁷ **He says that a priest exchanges the real world for something that seems glorious but is actually fictional, and Christianity, through pity, multiplies and increases the loss of strength in human beings.**

Like Nietzsche, Peterson also draws from myths and explains how religious value systems developed from them over time. For him, myths provide an *ethos* for understanding reality. This ethos puts order into chaos. This is interwoven in that narrative in which the gods assume specific roles that serve as the mirror-image of man’s actual place in the universe. Peterson says that “the mythological perspective has been overthrown by the empirical; or so it appears. This should mean that the morality predicated upon such myth should have disappeared, as well, as belief in comfortable illusion vanished.”⁸ Peterson believes that man might now finds himself in an absurd situation. He often loses track of the meaning of life, forgetting that fact that “life is intrinsically, religiously meaningful.”⁹

In Zen Buddhism, religion must go beyond any form of conceptualization. It belongs to an unobstructed higher plane. The deeper meaning of religious experience in Zen Buddhism surpasses formal abstraction. Upon examination, we find that the intellect must deal with

worldly functions and concerns. The brain is limited to that which is simply pragmatic, calculable and practical. Life becomes a problem-solving activity. But beyond this worldliness, Co explains that Zen, through meditation, is “in the search for inner peace, tranquility of the mind or insight into the unknown, realization of the absolute, the intellect proves to be of very little importance.”¹⁰

Nietzsche believes that Buddhism sees suffering in the negative sense. Freny Mistry, in *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, explains that “in proclaiming suffering to be an ontological reality, Buddhism, in Nietzsche’s view, does not do justice to this insight by embracing suffering as the fount of human creativity; it views suffering in terms of an evil engendered by the accretion of past guilt and action, and therefore to be eliminated.”¹¹ Mistry thinks that Nietzsche’s response to human suffering or “affliction reveals a greater consonance of outlook than Nietzsche would have us believe.”¹² However, he also affirms that, “Nietzsche’s life and writings reveal suffering as an experience of self-overcoming.”¹³

Peterson believes that some framework is necessary so that humans would not return to a universe of disorder. Without culture, he says that man would succumb to the uncertainty of his values. The pursuit of values for Peterson means that natural species, through the long process of evolution, create complex relations. He writes: “The ancient part of your brain specialized for assessing dominance watches how you are treated by other people. On that evidence, it renders a determination of your value and assigns you a status.”¹⁴ The hierarchies define who is competent. For him, this type of characterization cannot be based on gender roles or group identity. In this way, inequalities become natural because of the Pareto Optimal occurrence in the structures of the human organization. To such a hierarchy belongs the power to generate new actualities.

In Zen Buddhism, everything is metaphysically characterized by the idea of impermanence. For that matter, everything that exists “is always moving, moving, moving, changing, changing, changing, – nonstop.”¹⁵ Indeed, nothing is permanent. In the same way as Nietzsche conceives of reality as becoming, Zen also endorses the idea that truth is ‘changing’.

This sense of continuity, Makoto Ozaki says, means that “Zen is centered upon a moment of every present without mediating the historical epochs between the present and eternity with the result of the immediate unity of the present time and eternity, remaining abstract.”¹⁶

Meaning, for Peterson is the chief antidote to chaos. To illustrate this point, he opines that “there is an unspeakably primordial calculator, deep within you, at the very foundation of your brain, far below your thoughts and feelings.”¹⁷ However, humans also need to know where meaning comes from. Nihilism points to a lack of goal or purpose in life which makes people mere “playthings.” The “death of God,” in this way, also becomes some kind of a prognosis in terms of an individual who comes into terms with his existence to determine where the meaning of life is. This enables him to organize himself, according to Peterson, as a part of the hierarchy. The person acquires, by means of his psychological motivations, the instinct that will elaborate his sources of meaning. For Peterson, there is a complex structure in man which allows him to endure life. Man can derive the meanings therein which make him function in the world. Thus, the preservation of the hierarchy is the goal because it is where meaning dwells.

What is Truth?

The truth for Nietzsche is in a constant flux. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that “the more abstract the truth is that you would teach, the more you have to seduce the senses to it.”¹⁸ Nietzsche is explicating the character of Platonic concepts. Plato taught a dualism – the ‘world of forms’ and the ‘world of objects’, indicating that only ‘forms’ are real whereas ‘objects’ are mere copies. For Nietzsche, one has to overcome Plato’s metaphysics. Nietzsche appears to attack logos as truth. Andre Van Der Braak explains that for Nietzsche, man has to overcome his rootedness in the Platonic world and aim “at becoming able to incorporate more and higher perspectives, not in order to know the truth, but in order to become an embodiment of it.”¹⁹ Zarathustra teaches man to burn himself and rise from the ashes. In this way, man

recreates himself into something new. Through this novel interpretation of human existence, man would be able to overcome the impermanence of human existence.

For Peterson, the truth is primordial. Here, we can interpret this as some form of a 'will to power' in the Nietzschean sense. Braak writes in *Nietzsche and Zen* that the 'will to truth', as opposed to the 'will to power' only seeks to discover truth as the object of the senses.²⁰ What this means is that the 'will to truth' is limited to the mirror-image of the world. Truth emerges as a representation of human finitude. For Nietzsche, 'the will to truth' is to know what is empirical. But Peterson, in this light, expresses that empiricism and rationality have distorted the power of myths. Peterson says that humans must act on the basis of an *ethos*, an evolutionary framework that is for him is much older than the rational tradition of the *Enlightenment*, one that arises from millions of years in the evolutionary process, evident in the behavioral traits of some animals, preserved as myth, passed on as a narrative, and then finding its way by being coded into laws that guide how people must behave and act.

In Zen, the truth is beyond words. Master Sahn says that, "Zen means not being attached to words and speech. If you are attached to words and speech, you cannot understand your true nature and the nature of this whole universe."²¹ Rising above words means that Zen, "consists in acquiring a new viewpoint on life that we forego ordinary thinking that controls our usual life."²² But words do not only express what people do. Words also decode who we are. But precisely, this is what limits our perspective. Co says that the "tranquility of the mind or insight into the unknown, realization of the absolute, the intellect proves to be of very little importance."²³ It is logos that controls us. Yet, it is only by means of the 'ineffable' in which we are able to know the meaning of what is inside of us.

Nietzsche emphasizes the affirmation of human existence through the Apollonian element in man. This expresses the importance of myth for Nietzsche. Man is depicted as god and hero in Greek tragedy, demonstrating his struggles and the poetic ways in which such can be

overcome. Young explains that for Nietzsche, “the good artist is never an ‘educator’ in this sense – it does produce a simpler world, a shorter solution to the riddle of life, an abbreviation of the endlessly complicated calculus of human action and desire.”²⁴ Art for Nietzsche ought to be a signpost that guides humans into the future.²⁵ The concrete attributes of man, his capacity to celebrate life in the midst of all the disorder, giving balance into disunity, is the way in which man builds a future. This is how man rises above himself. Nietzsche writes in *Human, All too Human*:

The artists of earlier [Greek] times who imaginatively developed the existing images of the gods and imaginatively develop a beautiful image of man: he will scent out those cases in which, in the midst of our modern world and reality and without any artificial withdrawal from or warding off of this world, the great and beautiful soul is still possible, still able to embody itself in the harmonious and well-proportioned and thus acquire visibility, duration and the status of a model, and in so doing through the excitation of envy and emulation, help create the future.²⁶

Nietzsche, as cited by Peterson, exclaims the demise of the Christian God: “Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter.”²⁷ Transvaluation may be a necessity in the Nietzschean sense, but Peterson thinks that the emergence of any civilization could not have occurred without some meaningful framework that organized belief systems in the first place. Peterson counters, by asking this equally thought-provoking question: “How is it that complex and admirable ancient civilizations could have developed and flourished, initially, if they were predicated upon nonsense?”²⁸ Peterson acknowledges that the ultimate demise of all religious values would result to the destruction of what holds everything together. As an example, he mentions the emergence of totalitarianism.

The fall of religious values caused the many horrors and evils in history, the most appalling of which is the death of millions in the two world wars.

That being the case, it is wrong to assume that there is no meaning to life. In Nietzsche's aesthetic celebration of the superman, to go beyond what is terrifying and ugly about this world is to overcome absurdity. While Peterson does not object to Nietzsche, it can be said that the latter disagrees with the former in terms of religion. Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity is apparent. For Nietzsche, Christianity makes people weak and incapable of choosing the course of their own fate and destiny. Nietzsche clearly expresses this in *The Anti-Christ*: "Against this theological instinct I wage war: I have found its tracks everywhere. Whoever has theological blood in his veins is from the start crooked and dishonorable toward all things." Zen Buddhism might offer some respite. Co explains that Zen enlightenment concerns, "a direct looking into the nature of reality bypassing the analytical phase of intellection, instead penetrating into the unknown where the knower and the known become one in a spiritual unity."³⁰ Man must live the truth from within. Becoming the embodiment of truth means man goes into a higher realm, beyond the sensual and the intellectual, into that perspective of becoming. For Ozaki this means that idea of eternal enlightenment occurs "through the negative mediation of self-transformation and self-development in a diversity of different forms and other disguises."³¹ It is this type of unfolding that opens the window that reunites man to his very primordial origin. The truth is always what lies beyond us in the horizon of meaning. While terrible things have been done in the name of God, the distortion of values results to the drift toward a secular world in which we live in the rottenness of an unjust society.

Overcoming the Self

For Nietzsche, "suffering is an existential imperative meant to serve the will to power which implements and interprets it."³² As such, human suffering does not really result in resignation but to a celebration that "offers resistance and challenge to this will."³³ It is about saying

“yes” to life amidst all adversities. This is also the whole point of Ozaki. Suffering, in the positive sense, makes the individual stronger, and anyone who overcomes it feels the positive “experience of recurrent joy.”³⁴ The true joy of man is not in having avoided suffering but in having gone through it. When man masters its ill effects to realize a greater sense of self-realization, he brings himself to a higher perspective. Beyond all the pain, man sees the ultimate value of human life. This is what *Dionysius* meant for Nietzsche. While *Dionysius* was punished and stripped of all his godly attributes, he surpassed his ordeals to lay his claim to glory. *Dionysius* is the symbol for that man who has triumphed over life by overcoming his struggles and pains.

Peterson thinks that suffering is a necessary consequence of the evolutionary process. But he also believes that a life of meaning is the final goal of the human species. Man is formed, both by his nervous system and the moral frameworks which emerged out of two millennia of tradition and belief, as that being who is predisposed toward realizing the basic truth of his life. Peterson asserts, hence, that “the answer was this: through the elevation and development of the individual, and through the willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path.”³⁵ This heroic path for Peterson is that sense of individual responsibility. Man must carefully choose those ideas that usher a sense of meaning, elevating himself into the hierarchy in order to assume his important leadership role in the world. Peterson says that “we must each adopt as much responsibility as possible for individual life, society, and the world. We must each tell the truth and repair what is in disrepair and break down and recreate what is old and outdated. It is in this manner that we can and must reduce the suffering that poisons the world.”³⁶

According to Braak, “the perspective of *Dionysian* man, necessarily affirmative of suffering as also superior to it, is in essence commensurate with the Buddhist axiom of the necessity of transforming *dukkha* into *nirvana*.”³⁷ Suffering is inevitable in human life. Thus, man is simply limited to two options: to affirm human life or to resign to his fate. Braak writes that for Zen, “liberation from such clinging to

wrong views is the way to end suffering,” and that once one is liberated, “one is able to perceive reality and function freely in the world without compulsively needing to take refuge in limiting perspectival instances.”³⁸ For Buddhism, one needs to find a way out of suffering. This is a call for inner peace, for greater self-knowledge in order to be liberated from the illusions of the self.

Indeed, Nietzsche, according to Mistry, saw human suffering as “an existential and ethical imperative,” and one that “owes concurrently to his psychological study of his fellow man in whom he diagnosed a desire to bypass affliction.”³⁹ While Schopenhauer only saw pessimism as the route for man, Nietzsche perceived suffering as an affirmative driving force in man. Indeed, suffering should result to a self-discovery that can catapult man to a stronger sense of himself. The “will to power” is that courage to face human life. For Nietzsche, it determines how man as an individual elevates himself. Braak makes a nuance on its religious meaning: “Buddhism is about overcoming suffering, whereas Nietzsche aimed at affirming suffering.”⁴⁰

Now, this is where Nietzsche and Peterson must go separate ways. While Nietzsche rejects religion and the fundamental tenets of Christianity in favor of the secular order, Peterson defends tradition and how the same provides the uniting force that somehow govern the order of things in the world. The source of this unity for Peterson is the “unknown.” The great unknown (culture, religion, morality), or what we believe in, is what organizes the known (facts, the world). There is no way then for man to destroy what has been established over thousands if not millions of years that has allowed the human species to evolve. Peterson explains:

The unknown...provides a constant powerful source of “energy” for exploration and the generation of new information. Desire to formulate a representation of that which supersedes final classification and remains eternally motivating might well be understood as a prepotent and irresistible drive. That drive constitutes what might be regarded as the most fundamental religious impulse—

constitutes the culturally universal attempt to define and establish a relationship with God—and underlies the establishment of civilized historical order.⁴¹

We need to clarify some things. Nietzsche writes that “the ego subdues and kills.”⁴² What does Nietzsche mean by this? Firstly, the self is the source of man’s concept of the truth, in the same way as Peterson elevates the sense of individual responsibility as the fundamental truth of life. Ozaki explains that, “behind this reciprocal identity of word and truth lies the way of thinking tending towards affirming actuality as the self-manifestation of truth.”⁴³ According to Braak, the “peculiar and paradoxical thing is that both Nietzsche and Zen also deny that any such thing as a self ultimately exists. Their self-overcoming therefore is a self-overcoming without a self.”⁴⁴ Braak says that for Nietzsche, the true nature of man is a will to power.⁴⁵ Nietzsche replaces notions of the self with the conception of the human individual as a multiplicity of forces.⁴⁶ In contrast, the self for Zen is made up of five aggregates (*skandhas*):

The first aggregate is matter (*rupa*). The material part of our existence consists of the five sense-organs. The second aggregate is sensation (*vedana*). It results from the contact of the senses with the external world (*visaya*). The third aggregate corresponds to our conception (*samjna*). It is the power to form abstract images of objects. The fourth aggregate is action (*sanskara*). We act according to the sensations we receive. These actions are either mental (*caitta*) or non-mental (*prayukta*). The fifth aggregate is consciousness (*vijnanas*).⁴⁷

Mistry explains that the self for Zen, “is not a substance category or eternal essence but a designation for the composite of the five attachment groups.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the five aggregates characterize our attachment to reality. The five aggregates, however, lead us to a self that is ignorant. This ignorance makes people suffer. By comparison, Peterson recognizes

the reality of suffering and the necessity to overcome it. The psychologist writes that “suffering cannot be disbelieved away, however: rejection of the process that constantly renews the positive aspect of the constituent elements of experience merely ensures that their negative counterparts gain the upper hand.”⁴⁹ To end suffering, Buddhism says that we have to recognize its cause. Buddhists believe that the main cause of suffering is human desire.

Since suffering is a reality of life, the right attitude to it is to examine oneself and find the strength from within to be able to overcome its source. True courage in this regard is all about finding that will to rise above the self. Braak writes that “for Nietzsche, life, conceived as will to power, is that which continually overcomes itself,” where the person, “as an individual, it is in one’s nature as a creature of will to power that one must continually overcome oneself.”⁵⁰ For Peterson, this concept of overcoming is that instantiation of man in a hierarchy in which one recognizes that the same is the actual source of meaning in the universe. Expressing his affirmation of Tolstoy, he writes that the Russian writer sees nihilism as that “disgust with the individual and human society, combined with the desire for the eradication of existence—is one logical “evil” consequence of heightened self-consciousness.”⁵¹

But what is the nature of this self-overcoming for these thinkers? Self-overcoming for Nietzsche, according to Braak, is that struggle toward “realizing emptiness.”⁵² This emptiness, similar to the idea of the “unknown” in Peterson, is seeing the nothing of human existence. In way, some commentators are wrong in suggesting that Nietzsche is simply nihilistic toward life. Rather, Nietzsche is trying to counter the meaninglessness that characterized Europe during his time. Morality was on a tailspin. Nietzsche’s real message is for man to assert his bold claim against the dark clouds enveloping his singular existence. Meanwhile, Peterson has faith in the ability of man toward self-transformation. Man has learned to adapt and develop ways. Through this, he has also constructed systems that determine the course of his life and those around him. This is the power of having created multiple hierarchies that are so

grounded in the freedom of man that defines for the same his proper place in the system. Citing the behavior of lobsters, the Canadian psychologist writes:

In the aftermath of a losing battle, regardless of how aggressively a lobster has behaved, it becomes unwilling to fight further, even against another, previously defeated opponent. A vanquished competitor loses confidence, sometimes for days. Sometimes the defeat can have even more severe consequences. If a dominant lobster is badly defeated, its brain basically dissolves. Then it grows a new, subordinate's brain—one more appropriate to its new, lowly position.⁵³

Zen enlightenment is the escape from a cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). If man is not reborn, he would still be attached to the pleasures and sins of the world. Braak adds that “to study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.”⁵⁴ Mistry concurs on this when he intimates that “the Buddhist perspective of (non-self) is analogous with Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, a critique of man and directed against human stupidity and egoism.”⁵⁵ Self-centeredness is a weakness that brings man tremendous suffering. To escape from his suffering, man must rise above his ego. Braak explains that “Zen, as a somatic practice, aims to extinguish the incorporated basic error of an ego-centered perspective.”⁵⁶ Zen, in its essential meaning, “is a technique of seeing within and discovering one’s own being with the view of liberating oneself from the bondage of the ego, experienced here and now.”⁵⁷

In man’s ordinary life, he is attached to the world and is therefore a slave to his desires. He is easily corrupted by his whims and in this regard, he loses his true sense of self-liberation. But man can only overcome suffering when he turns away from that concept of self. This turning away is not meant to disregard oneself. Rather, it is meant to make one’s existence full by emptying it of self-centeredness. In this way, Braak suggests that “the metaphor of self-cultivation and self-overcoming,

which suggests a conscious pursuit of emancipation and authenticity to a sovereign individual.”⁵⁸ Finding one’s place in the universe is the true meaning of human freedom.

Morality as Self-Mastery

Western and Oriental thought are portrayed by sharp contrasts, foremost of which is the idea that in Oriental thought, religious tenets also expresses a philosophy of life. While both in a way exhibit an *ethos*, Western philosophy is characterized by rationality at its very core whereas Oriental thought dwells on oneness with nature. Co clarifies that in Buddhism, for instance, “all reasoning must be destroyed and a new form of consciousness that defies logic must be realized.”⁵⁹ Humphreys is more emphatic and points to an enigma when he says, “Zen is incommunicable.”⁶⁰

And so, one is tempted to suggest that morality must be thrown away in favor of the *ethos* of the superman. Nietzsche, for instance, attacks Christian morality as ‘decadent’. He writes: “the over-valuation of goodness I already regard as a consequence of decadence as a symptom of weakness, as incompatible with an ascending.”⁶¹ Yet, Christian ethics is grounded in the concept of human equality. The idea of human dignity had been actually influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Man is created in God’s image and likeness, and so therefore he is endowed with the attribute of perfection that is present in the absolute sense in the Transcendent. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche sets out the task of his philosophical itinerary, which is “the revaluation of all hitherto existing values themselves.”⁶²

Zen Buddhism, in the writings of D.T. Suzuki, speaks of the distinction between religion and morality or of religious feeling and conscience while placing the latter on a ‘higher plane’ compared to the former. Suzuki starts by admitting that “religious feeling is first awakened by the self-critical conscience.”⁶³ There is a metaphysical distance between the two. Whereas morality deals with human action, Zen brings us into “the abyss of being.”⁶⁴ Nietzsche writes that “the ladder is tremendous upon

which he climbs up and down; he has seen further, willed further, been capable of further than any other than man.”⁶⁵ Still, this ladder points to the unknown and mysterious. For Peterson humans, “produce models of what is and what should be, and how to transform one into the other.”⁶⁶ Ozaki talks about the ‘original essence’ of Zen as the deeper ground and source of man’s self-negating capacity. The idea of overcoming in this respect dwells in the capacity of man for time-reversal or his power to surpass being bound by the excesses of human finitude by going back into an original essence or that sense of self-emptying.

This ‘original essence’ might as well be the framework that Peterson talks about. He explains that “we imitate and map adaptive behaviors – behaviors that efficiently reach a desired end – so that we can transform the mysterious unknown into the desirable and predictable; so that the social and nonsocial aspects of our experience remain under our control.”⁶⁷ The human being, in this way is a product of processes that enable the same to conceive of his stories of right and wrong. Peterson then exclaims that the “particular behaviors we imitate and represent, organized into a coherent unit, shared with others, constitute our cultures; constitute the manner in which we bring order to our existence.”⁶⁸

Suzuki warns that morality is unable to account for its foundational or metaphysical source – God. Christianity relates conscience to God as its ultimate origin. For Christians, conscience as a moral imperative defines for humans the meaning of right and wrong. In this regard, it is the way upon which Christians connect religion with morality or that reality wherein “religion becomes some an outgrowth of morality.”⁶⁹ But Suzuki makes a clear distinction between the Christian and the Buddhist view. For him, defining conscience as ‘external’ places it outside the religious sphere. Suzuki says that “the essence of the religious life is absolute freedom, perfect spontaneity, or utter abandonment.”⁷⁰ For Christians, conscience is a moral restraint that guides human action toward the good and the possibility of punishment. For Peterson, religion may be somewhat indispensable when it comes to the design of our moral principles. Peterson writes:

It has taken mankind thousands of years of work to develop dawning awareness of the nature of evil—to produce a detailed dramatic representation of the process that makes up the core of human maladaptation and voluntarily produced misery. It seems premature to throw away the fruit of that labor or to presume that it is something other than what it appears before we understand what it signifies. Consciousness of evil emerged first as ritual enactment, then as dynamic image, expressed in myth.⁷¹

Moral responsibility comes from within as part of man's nature. Suzuki explains that since human "responsibility is the core of morality; the moral man cannot be irresponsible."⁷² Peterson also expresses the same when he talks about the individual who is able to account for himself and take a hold of his own vessel of the truth. Humphreys says that "Zen, being the essence of freedom, resents all rules which hamper and constrain the mind."⁷³ Self-mastery, in Nietzsche's sense, is the freedom from the world of the ego, or in a way, freeing the ego from the bondage of the world. D.T. Suzuki reminds us, in *Eight Lectures on Ch'an*, that ultimate freedom can only be achieved once the self is mastered or once it can "work through a principle higher than itself."⁷⁴ On a similar note, Peterson explains that "a moral philosophy, which is a pattern for behavior and interpretation, is therefore dependent for its existence upon a mythology, which is a collection of images of behaviors, which emerge, in turn, as a consequence of social interaction (cooperation and competition), designed to meet emotional demands."⁷⁵

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche expresses: "How to surpass man? The superman, I have at heart; that is the first and only thing to me: not the neighbor, not the poorest, not the sorriest, not the best."⁷⁶ Nietzsche appeals to the primordial understanding of man or that *Dionysian* element in us that affirms human greatness or that zenith of the individual which is realized in the overflowing beauty of life. This is to locate the individual in his greatest glories; it is man extolling the values of courage and perseverance, and repudiating the values of the weak, and this happens

only when man conquers himself. The Buddha says: “If a man were to conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, another conquers one, himself, he indeed is the greatest of conquerors.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

This paper has shown the proximate connection of the philosophies of F. Nietzsche, Zen Buddhism, and Jordan Peterson. Myth overcomes human reason. This is apparent in the concepts of meaning, the truth, and self-overcoming. For Peterson, evolution is part of the formation of the *ethos* of society. But there is a theme that unites their thoughts and that is the element of rising above the self or self-overcoming as the profound meaning of human freedom. While Nietzsche and Peterson go separate ways in their respective views on Christianity, they meet halfway in the idea of transcendence. Zen Buddhism also expresses the same in the notion of enlightenment. The will to meaning, in this way, is the claim that makes manifest the importance of truth as human beings affirm the higher value of human life. Indeed, the distinct philosophies cited above involve a primordial understanding of human finitude. The concept of multiple hierarchies implies that the natural order of things is for man to assume a dominant role in the world. Humans suffer in life, but what remains constant is the human capacity for transcendence.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, (Canada: Random House, 2018), 1.

² Alfredo Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*. (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2003), 106.

³ Christmas Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1949), 4.

⁴ Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 269.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Translated by Thomas Wayne, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 106.

⁷ Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179.

⁸ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 106.

¹¹ Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1981), 116.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 16

¹⁵ Seung Sahn, *The Compass of Zen*, (Massachusetts: Shambala Publications, 1997), 272.

¹⁶ Makoto Ozaki, "Heidegger and the Lotus Sutra on the Beginning: Opening Up of Truth as Unhiddenness," In *Biocosmology – NeoAristotelianism*, Volume 5:2 (2005): 241.

¹⁷ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 15.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufman, (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 87.

¹⁹ Andre Van Der Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹ Sahn, *The Compass of Zen*, 302.

²² Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁴ Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 99.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), 126.

²⁸ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 7.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 106.

³⁰ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 108.

³¹ Ozaki, "Heidegger and the Lotus Sutra on the Beginning," 246.

³² Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, 118.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, xxvii.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 14.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

³⁹ Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, 116.

⁴⁰ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 13.

⁴¹ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 152

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Translated by Walter Kaufman. (New York: Vintage, 1967), 403.

⁴³ Ozaki, "Heidegger and the Lotus Sutra on the Beginning," 246.

⁴⁴ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 328.

⁵⁰ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 25.

⁵¹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 328.

⁵² Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 29.

⁵³ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 7.

⁵⁴ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 92.

⁵⁵ Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, 81.

⁵⁶ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 92.

⁵⁷ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 106.

⁵⁸ Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen*, 83.

⁵⁹ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*.

⁶⁰ Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, 2.

⁶¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 92.

⁶² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 79.

- ⁶³ Suzuki, D.T. *Eight Lectures on Chan*, ed. Gishin Tokiwa, (Kamakura: Matsugaoka Bunko Foundation, 2011), 99.
- ⁶⁴ Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, 3.
- ⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ.*, 74.
- ⁶⁶ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, 14
- ⁶⁷ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 102.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Suzuki, *Eight Lectures on Chan*,4.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 99-100.
- ⁷¹ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 323.
- ⁷² Suzuki, *Eight Lectures on Chan*, 100.
- ⁷³ Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, 3.
- ⁷⁴ Suzuki, *Eight Lectures on Chan*, 100.
- ⁷⁵ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 242.
- ⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 243.
- ⁷⁷ Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, 50.

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