

On the Significance of Genealogy in Nietzsche's Critique of Morality*

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AT times Nietzsche's discussion of morality seems to be nothing more than a confused and polemic attack, a verbal war against traditional values, quasi-philosophical bombs planted by a "moral terrorist"¹—but underlying this apparently arbitrary bombardment of accusations, I shall argue in this paper, there is to be revealed a network of explanations of and objections against morality. Understanding Nietzsche's attack on morality requires one to make use of methods similar to those Nietzsche himself employs. The *creative* activity of genealogy, a science of which only Nietzsche's "readers, [his] right readers, [his] predestined readers"² are capable, supplies the methodological means by which Nietzsche's works are to be made sense of.

Why did Nietzsche investigate into the origin of morality and how is genealogy related to his overall critique of morality? These questions I would like to answer in the following.

In order to arrive at a satisfactory answer, one needs to know what Nietzsche means by the expression 'morality' and what his criticisms of it are. Part I offers a particularly narrow conception of morality, merging into an outline of Nietzsche's attack against this conception. Part II out-

* I am indebted to Simon Blackburn and, especially, Raymond Geuss for helpful discussions on this topic.

¹ Danto 18.

² A, Preface. I have cited Nietzsche's works using the standard English-language acronyms: *The Gay Science* (GS), *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (WS), *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM), *The Antichrist* (A), and *The Will to Power* (WP). Roman numerals refer to major divi-

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lines a more general conception that enables us to infer the status of Nietzsche's critique (Part III). Part IV will be concerned with the status of genealogy in Nietzsche's critique of morality.

I. Morality in the Traditional Sense

There is an obvious way in which Nietzsche uses the term 'morality', namely as referring to what Brian Leiter has called "Morality in the Pejorative Sense" or *traditional morality*.

Nietzsche's discussion of traditional morality commences from two distinct starting points, which are merged with the introduction of a set of criteria by which each branch can be measured. The first branch (A) is concerned with the conditions and circumstances under which moral values arise and develop; the second branch (B) investigates the notion of traditional morality itself, and is hence concerned with its theoretical implications and content. I shall discuss each strand in turn.

A. THE GENEALOGICAL ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL MORALITY

In his *Genealogy*, Nietzsche is concerned with a particular aspect of traditional moral values, namely with "the conditions and circumstances in which they grew."³

Nietzsche traces the origin of traditional morality back to two juxtaposed types of human being, which he, provocatively and in his own meaning of the words, calls "slaves" and "masters." To these two types of man there correspond two equally juxtaposed moralities,⁴ which are supposed to shed light on the original meanings of the words 'good', 'bad', and 'evil'. The distinctive character of the master morality in primordial times is that it evaluates things naturally: there are desirable attributes for a person to possess, including health, strength, physical attractiveness, and overall toughness, and a vast number of talents and gifts, such as intelligence, imagination, genuine creativity, endurance, and stamina. With reference

sions or chapters, Arabic numerals refer to sections.

³ GM, Preface 6.

to the corresponding joy and happiness of their possession, persons who could be characterized by these qualities called themselves 'good'—'good', therefore, far from having any moral connotation, signifies merely a positive evaluation of the nature of man as an active, powerful, and self-affirming individual. The word 'bad', the initial antipode of the expression 'good', did not denote more than the lack of these qualities—it was, as Bergmann remarks, "a lame afterthought,"⁵ occasionally related to a pitiful, considerate, even regretful benevolence; "finally all the words referring to the common man have remained as expressions signifying 'unhappy', 'pitiable'."⁶ The slaves, characteristically impotent, reactive, self-negating and weak, tried to free themselves from the imprisonment of their own inferiority; but due to their lack of creativity, energy, vitality, and mental and physical health, they hopelessly failed to overcome their lives of joylessness and misery. Having failed to live up to the master's own standards, the slaves' misery became, against all metaphysical odds and natural regularities, the mother of creativity: through a "Trojan horse trick of the disadvantaged,"⁷ the slaves inverted the existing dichotomy of moral values and construed their enemies as the *Evil Ones*. The slaves' valuation 'evil' now refers to the people who possess those attributes which formerly distinguished the 'good'—and since the slaves did not possess those attributes, they were in a position to call themselves 'good', only as opposed to the new primary notion 'evil'.

This is, according to Nietzsche, the fundamental basis of nineteenth-century Central European morality. I shall complement Nietzsche's portrayal of the origin of traditional morality by adding some brief comments. First, Nietzsche does not suggest a necessity or hidden logic in this historical process. The transformation of values into moral values is purely accidental. Second, it is important to acknowledge the special status of Nietzsche's story: although it is supposed to be part of the actual history of morality, and is therefore not to be confused with an analogy or metaphor, it is nevertheless idealized and simplified, reduced to not

⁴ These two moralities are opposed to each other only in an idealized sense. Any concrete, existing morality will be a combination of elements from both master and slave moralities.

⁵ Bergmann 30.

⁶ GM, I.10. Nietzsche employs as examples the (ancient) Greek expressions *deilos* (cowardly, worth-

more than rudimentary aspects of past social and political life. An explanation of macro-social phenomena such as morality, in the sense in which Nietzsche envisages it, requires the construction of what Max Weber would later call *ideal types*, which abstract and summarize the common features of complexes. Indeed, Nietzsche creates a rhetorical illusion here; although he describes the clash of two types of people characterized by sets of fixed dichotomies,⁸ it would be naive to take Nietzsche's story entirely on face value. The history of Western morality can only be understood if these dichotomies are not seen as fixed and exclusive, but rather as tendencies in character. This point will become evident if we consider the following examples: (1) The slaves are supposed to be neither creative nor self-affirming. In at least one instance, however, it has been the slaves who have been creative and self-affirming, namely by inverting the master's values and inventing a new moral valuation. (2) The masters, although self-affirming, powerful, and creative, are not genuinely autarkic. Only through the *pathos of distance* are the masters able to create their own positive view about themselves; they need the slaves in order to feel superior and distant to them, to look down on them. (3) Moreover, the powerful/weak dichotomy cannot be held fixed if one wants to understand the importance of the will to power as the concept that gives life and human action their content. The concept of power must be understood in such a way that every instance of power exercises itself in every possible way at every moment; that is to say, there is no conceptual distinction between the subject that exercises power and power itself. In the final analysis, therefore, the slaves are powerful as well. Christianity, then, must be thought of as the product of a successful exercise of power that has managed to dominate the morality of human life ever since.

B. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONTENT

The following characteristics Nietzsche regards not only as fatal defects of traditional morality but also as corruptive and dangerous:

- (1) Morality's *specific content* (for example, antagonism against excel-

less), *deilaos* (paltry), *poneros* (good for nothing, knavish), and *mochtheros* (suffering hardship, knav-

NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MORALITY

lence, selflessness, equality) is not life-enhancing, and hence untenable;

(2) Morally *dualistic code of evaluation* of behavior in terms of positive/negative dichotomies is untenable;

(3) Morality claims *universality* in the sense that it is supposed to apply to all human beings equally;

(4) The obligations and duties imposed by traditional morality on its followers are supposed to be *unconditional*, which is equally untenable.

Nietzsche's criticisms of traditional morality are most eloquently delineated if they are contrasted with his own normative code, which I shall label his *morality of the future*.

(1) His morality is not so much related to what an agent *does* but rather what *abilities* and *characteristics* he has. Nietzsche explicitly rejects the view that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the nature of an agent and the nature of the actions he carries out. Correspondingly, Nietzsche would also have to reject the idea of moral responsibility. And since an agent will act in accordance with his nature, Nietzsche cannot advance an actual morality in the form of a set of codes of behavior. His normative position is necessarily only a *description* of actions certain types would act in accordance with anyway because they cannot act differently.

The fundamental difference between human types expresses itself in the distinction between ascending and descending, between higher and lower types of man. The slaves, I suggest, roughly fit the description 'descending'. The higher type of man, on the contrary, is not without qualifications to be assimilated with the masters. Obviously there will be similarities: physical vitality and healthiness, strength, a yes-saying attitude towards life, joy, happiness, pleasure, and, to some extent, intelligence. But the higher man Nietzsche has in mind possesses a variety of other characteristics, some of which the masters did not possess, for example, intellectual subtlety, cleverness, an expressive genuine creativity, artistic sensitivity and ability, love for truth, a will to gain knowledge, the ability not to despair of the truth, and the ability to deal with and gain from horrible experiences and sufferings.

(2) The ascending/descending distinction is not to be understood as

a dichotomy, but rather as a *difference in degree*. The distinction expresses itself in people in “Stufen der Scheinbarkeit...und hellere[n] und dunklere[n] Schatten und Gesamttönen des Scheins.”⁹ Nietzsche’s normative position, therefore, does not rely upon a moral dualism as traditional morality characteristically does.

(3) & (4) In a society dominated by traditional morality, the individual’s creative force upon morality is remarkably small. On the contrary, the normative force to which every member of society is exposed, in the form of obligations, codes of behavior, and other moral rules and guidelines, is disproportionally high. The cultural predomination of traditional morality, therefore, can subtly affect the attitudes of all members of that culture. This deprives potentially higher man of opportunities necessary to his development. An individual with the potential for great achievements might be influenced to believe, for example, that happiness is good and suffering bad, although suffering is a precondition for the development of that potential. In pursuing the values induced by society instead of her own, the individual is likely to waste her potential. Hence, Nietzsche concludes, traditional morality is alienating, harmful, and destructive to the development of human excellence.

The morality of the future, on the contrary, since it is subjective and conditional on the characteristics of the person holding it, does not have these devastating effects. Getting to hold values is itself a creative activity and furthers excellence, and since there is a constant re-creation of subjective norms, older values might be abandoned at some stage. Therefore, Nietzsche argues, axiological values must not be unconditional or universal. If they are, they endanger the higher type of man.

According to Nietzsche, since every single component mentioned above makes a morality a morality in the traditional sense, all these features must be eliminated. It is not sufficient to eliminate only one or the other of the traditional constituents.

II. Morality as a Cultural Phenomenon

I wish to bring into discussion a distinction emphasized by Brian

ish), each of which means “wretched” in addition to their other connotations.

Leiter, namely the distinction between *Morality*¹⁰ as a cultural phenomenon and *moral theory*.¹¹ Nietzsche is not so much interested in any systematized and improved theoretical framework to which morality is reduced. Indeed, it seems evident that Nietzsche denies the possibility of any such reduction. Nietzsche is rather interested in how morality influences human beings and their ways of forming beliefs and justifying conduct, how motivations for actions are created by morality and, indeed, how morality is created by human beings—not as a system of thought but as a, partly unconscious, psychological expression of certain types of people and the distinctive concentration of their wills.

This distinction helps us to see how Nietzsche's general perception of morality is to be understood. As a cultural phenomenon, *Morality* is inevitably a historical concept and, for Nietzsche, "only that which has no history is definable."¹² Hence, Nietzsche concludes, there is no defining (set of) necessary and sufficient condition(s) by which concepts of morality can be *identified* as concepts of morality, "as if all words were not pockets into which now this and now that has been put, and now many things at once."¹³ Rather, different concepts of morality are "best connected to each other by 'family resemblances,' and there are no antecedently specifiable limits to what can count as sufficient 'resemblance' to make the term 'morality' correctly applicable."¹⁴ Nietzsche is, therefore, an anti-essentialist with regards to the concept of morality.

Even though it has by itself no specific content, origin, internal structure, motivational property, or social function, there will be in any society at any given time a cultural phenomenon that might appropriately be called *Morality*. It seems hence plausible to suggest that, in its widest sense, *Morality* cannot be rejected in much the same way sociability cannot be rejected from within a society. *Morality* is an empty concept that is actualized by particular sets of values. Traditional morality, then, is not a wider or different set of values, but rather a summarizing term for all par-

⁷ Bergmann 30.

⁸ Arguably, the most essential dichotomies are: active/reactive, affirmative/negating, genuinely creative/not creative, and powerful/weak.

⁹ "Degrees of apparentness...and lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance." BGE, §34.

¹⁰ In the following, the capitalized term '*Morality*' refers to morality as a cultural phenomenon,

ticular actualizations of Morality which involve one or more of the criticisms mentioned above. Since Christianity is the origin of Western morality, its moral code is, *for us*, the paradigmatic instance of traditional morality.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to list a number of meanings Nietzsche has reserved for the term ‘morality’—in Nietzsche’s writings, for reasons I have just advanced, ‘morality’ can literally mean anything between Judeo-Christian morality and Morality as a cultural phenomenon. Nietzsche’s employment of the expression is entirely context-dependent. Nevertheless, if one is determined to understand Nietzsche’s critique of morality, it is of major importance to identify the sense in which Nietzsche uses the term ‘morality’ on any particular occasion.

III. The Status of Nietzsche’s Analysis of Traditional Morality

These considerations help us to understand the status of Nietzsche’s critical analysis of traditional morality. Since Nietzsche argues against neither a definable concept nor a moral theory, he does not attempt to employ a formal objection against traditional morality. First of all, Nietzsche does not have any objection to falsity or untruth *simpliciter*. States of affairs can rest upon false assumptions or metaphysical claims, but nevertheless further life—and the latter is the criterion by which justification for existence can be measured. And, second, since there is no one fixed (set of) proposition(s) traditional morality is committed to in every form at all times, there is no one formal objection which is sufficient to refute traditional morality. Therefore, by his own standards, formal objections do not help Nietzsche at all, or, as he famously proclaims, “What have I to do with refutations!”¹⁵ Nietzsche’s project is necessarily empirical, his aim is “to replace the improbable with the more probable, possibly one error with another.”¹⁶

Therefore, Nietzsche’s objections outlined above are to be thought of as a *case*, not as a set of formal objections, against “all that has hitherto

i.e., to an abstract social category. As an abstractum the notion lacks a normative dimension, and

been celebrated on earth as morality."¹⁷ His criticisms reveal that the *type of people* who hold traditional moral values do so due to weakness, disability, and misunderstanding. And since traditional morality perverts life, since it is dangerous, subversive, self-abnegating, and self-sacrificing, in short, since it hinders life instead of furthering it, traditional moral values must be rejected.

IV. The Status of Genealogy in the Critique of Morality

We are now in a position to delineate the status of genealogy in the morality critique. Nietzsche's genealogical investigation serves a variety of purposes in the corpus of his writings on morality, and it is vital to acknowledge this diversity in order to understand how it complements his general "cultural" critique.

(A) First, as a minor function, genealogy is part of Nietzsche's project of disentangling the complex notion of morality, and is in this sense preliminary to metaethical discourse in the Nietzschean sense. Due to his anti-essentialism and his commitment to morality as a social institution rather than a theoretical framework, Nietzsche must devote a part of his discussion to the clarification of the object of analysis before he will be in a position to treat morality as an object of philosophical discourse. In this sense, genealogy is not a process of evaluation but rather a process of providing a basis of explanation.

(B) Second, Nietzsche's genealogy, I would like to suggest, has different functions *depending on the type of person* who is confronted with it. For followers of traditional morality, the genealogical functions as the revelation of a real problem, a problem concerning morality that has been overlooked for centuries. This problem is "something much more important than hypothesis-mongering...on the origin of morality.... What [is] at stake [is] the *value* of morality."¹⁸ The second function of the genealogical analysis, then, facilitates Nietzsche's project that "the value of these [moral] values themselves must first be called into question."¹⁹ In other words, Nietzsche's genealogy of morality is supposed to undermine the

is by itself both contentless and irrefutable.

¹¹ See Leiter, "Nietzsche" 252.

apparently obvious connotations we associate with moral values and to demonstrate that traditional morality itself is just “a special case of immorality.”²⁰ Nietzsche regarded himself as the first thinker to go beyond traditional ethical discourse in the sense that he does not take the value of moral values—i.e., their traditional connotations—for granted.

For followers of traditional morality these connotations are essential and undermining them, by showing that they are inconsistent with one another, equals undermining traditional morality itself. Therefore, even though genealogical analysis has for Nietzsche a different function, he nevertheless regarded its result as an important motivation for Christians to gradually turn against their own beliefs.

It is important not to confuse this second function with an actual objection against morality. Nietzsche has frequently been misinterpreted in two ways:

(1) A number of critics have attributed to Nietzsche the view that since traditional morality arises out of immorality, it possesses *therefore* only negative value, and must hence be rejected. This interpretation has then been used to object against Nietzsche that by moving from the origin of traditional morality to its value, he commits a genetic fallacy. I do not think that this interpretation is successful. Nietzsche is aware of this fallacy and explicitly says, in a work published before the *Genealogy* was written, that traditional morality “is completely independent...from the weeds of error with which it was perhaps overgrown.”²¹ Furthermore, “To object to morality simply because it relies on immoral means would be...to make yet another moral judgment”²² from the point of view of traditional moral valuation. Consequently, if Nietzsche thought of his genealogy as an objection in this sense, he would have presupposed traditional moral values and his investigation was straightforwardly self-defeating. I should suggest that attributing such a blunt fallacy to one of morality’s most brilliant critics brusquely trivializes Nietzsche’s point.

(2) It has also frequently been argued that Nietzsche advances an internal critique of traditional morality here: since traditional morality arises out

²² GM, II.13.

²³ WS, §33.

²⁴ Geuss 167.

of immorality, it must be internally fallacious or inconsistent. I do not think that this interpretation does justice to Nietzsche's intentions: as already stated, even if morality were inconsistent, Nietzsche would not have a particular problem with it, for not consistency but the enhancement of life is the criterion of justification Nietzsche employs. Moreover, Nietzsche's own normative position is based on the thought that the more advanced incompatible strands of different moralities are developed within a person or society, the more ethically sophisticated the person or society is. Therefore, if Nietzsche argues against traditional morality *because* it is inconsistent, he would have to acknowledge the inconsistency, and hence invalidity, of his own morality—but he explicitly does not. Finally, inconsistency is a notion that can meaningfully be applied to moral or metaethical theories, but not, as Nietzsche discusses it, to Morality as a cultural phenomenon. To reduce Nietzsche's objection against morality to an internal critique, therefore, is to ignore the most substantial part of his criticisms, namely the dimension of cultural critique.

(C) Third, I shall argue that genealogy lies at the heart of Nietzsche's critique in the sense that it serves as an *experimental explanation* in the way Nietzsche envisages it for the philosophers of the future.²³ Nevertheless, genealogy is logically separated from Nietzsche's overall criticisms. This fact has led to much confusion in contemporary Nietzsche scholarship, so it seems worth elaboration.

Tracing the history of morality gives an indication that traditional morality opposes higher men as Nietzsche envisages them—but this could have been known also by just identifying mid-nineteenth century Western morality's incompatibility with the life of higher men. Strictly speaking, therefore, a natural history of morality is not necessary to criticize morality on Nietzschean grounds.

It seems more plausible to suggest that genealogy arose, for Nietzsche and other free spirits not imprisoned in the dungeon of traditional morality, out of a special interest, initially remote from his overall critique of morality. This special interest evolved from the question, "How could humanity have been deceived for almost two millennia, deceived by such a dangerous, sick, and subversive phenomenon?" Far from being supposed

to criticize, to object, and to finally reject morality, genealogy “is meant to supplement and clarify”²⁴ Nietzsche’s analysis and critique of morality. Genealogical investigation into the history of traditional morality, then, serves as an explanation of *why* moral values endanger the ascending type of man, rather than constituting evidence for the fact *that* they endanger him. Tracing the origin of morality reveals the deeply rooted opposition of traditional morality to all genuinely creative, individual, and self-affirming beings, and hence explains how morality became and remained “the danger of dangers.”²⁵

It is important to stress the predicate ‘experimental’ in this context. Nietzsche does not claim that his *Genealogy* already is a unified account of the origin of morality. Rather, Nietzsche’s genealogy is an ongoing and continuous attempt to gain an understanding of morality and is to be continued by the philosophers of the future.²⁶ This is not done by applying a fixed methodology, but methods from a wide range of sciences including psychology, philology, and physiology. Therefore, the creation of new well-supported hypotheses in psychology or physiology can influence a genealogical investigation in the same way a discovery of historical facts can. In this sense, genealogy is not to be thought of as purely historical; it rather includes history as a possibility of investigation.

Genealogy, then, complements, illuminates, and supports Nietzsche’s analysis and criticisms of traditional morality. Equally, his morality of the future and the corresponding criticisms of traditional morality illuminate the genealogical investigation. According to Nietzsche, from the perspective of his morality of the future, his genealogy is a historically more successful and accurate account of the origin of traditional morality than could be achieved from the view point of traditional morality.

Genealogy of morality and analysis of morality, therefore, stand in a continuous dialectical relation, which the philosopher of the future is supposed to explore. Only in treating the relation between genealogy and analysis as a productive circle of mutual illumination, according to Nietzsche, is an insight into the nature and complexity of human states of affairs possible.

¹⁵ GM, Preface 4.

¹⁶ GM, Preface 4.

NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MORALITY

NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MORALITY

¹⁷ GM, Preface 3.

¹⁸ GM, Preface 5.

¹⁹ GM, Preface 6.

²⁰ WP, 308; see 401, 406.

²¹ GS, §345.

²² Nehamas 201.

²³ See BGE, §42.

²⁴ Following the title page of the first edition of GM.

²⁵ GM, Preface 6.

²⁶ See GM, Preface 6.

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