

Friedrich Nietzsche

On the Genealogy of Morality

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Objectives

1. Introduce the nature and function of a genealogy.
2. Show the interconnections between each part of the *Genealogy*.
3. Outline the 'slave revolt' in morality.
4. Outline Nietzsche's explanations of bad conscience and guilt.
5. Outline Nietzsche's treatment of the ascetic ideals.

Commentary

Introduction

[Friedrich Nietzsche's](#) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, first published in 1887, is one of his most focussed works, and the one that has gained the most attention in academic philosophy, especially among those interested in both morality and the philosophical consequences of 'genealogy'. The work seeks to explain the general shape of Western liberal morality, an explanation Nietzsche thinks will put us in a good position to criticise, or 'revalue' that system. Nietzsche thinks that this revaluation is necessary because his contemporaries, who accepted a secular view of the world, and took science as the only proper path to knowledge, failed to recognize the significance of modernity for morality, and its possibly horrific consequence of 'suicidal nihilism'.

The Preface

The work comprises a preface, and the three separate, but nevertheless interconnected, treatises. Nietzsche begins the preface by remarking that 'we knowers' are 'unknown to ourselves'. This intimates a theme developed towards the end of the work. Very roughly, Nietzsche holds that many of his contemporaries who pursue science, in the broad sense of that term, are still unconsciously beholden to values born of a religious interpretation of the world, an interpretation they otherwise reject. We will return to this, but immediately after introducing the claim about knowers being ignorant of themselves, Nietzsche turns to the key question of the work, namely 'under what conditions did man invent those value judgments good and evil?' (GM preface 3). Nietzsche is not considering any religious or metaphysical origins of those values (origins 'behind the world') but is concerned with naturalistic origins: humanity's 'invention' of good and evil. He is, however, sceptical of the accounts others have so far given. These accounts he calls the 'English sort', which he deems to be 'reverse and perverse' (GM preface 4). Most importantly, they are merely speculative ('hypothesizing into the blue') rather than offering what Nietzsche seeks to offer, namely 'the real history of morality', that 'which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed' (GM preface 7). Although he calls such accounts 'English', the key person Nietzsche mentions in this connection is his erstwhile German friend Paul Rée. Rée wrote a book called *The Origin of Moral Sensations* at about the same time Nietzsche, under Rée's influence, wrote *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche's own early foray into the origins of morality. Rée's own work was indebted to

British philosophy, and more pointedly, exhibits the faults that Nietzsche thinks ‘English’ genealogies exhibit.

As well as being too speculative, such accounts are insufficiently sceptical about the value of morality, taking it as a given. Hence Nietzsche mentions a second question about values in the Preface, namely ‘what value do these they themselves have?’ (GM Preface 3). He makes it clear, at GM Preface 5 and 6, the question of the value of these values is a more important issue than that of their origins. We need ‘a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question*’ (GM Preface 6). It would be a mistake, however, to think that Nietzsche offers his critique or revaluation of values within the pages of the GM. Elsewhere Nietzsche explicitly disconnects an account of the origins of morality from a critique, writing that ‘the history of origins [of moral judgments]...is something quite different from a critique’ and a ‘morality of could even have grown out of an error, and realization of this fact would not as much as touch the problem of its value’ (GS, 345). Instead, when summarizing his own books in his *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes the GM constitutes ‘a psychologist’s three crucial *preparatory* works for a revaluation of all values’ (EH “Why I write such good books”).

How does it do this? There is a tendency to treat one’s own values as simply ‘given’ or intuitive and obvious. Of course, one might argue about particular courses of action, or particular rights and wrongs, but such discussions take place within a shared framework of general agreement of what counts as good or bad. Nietzsche thinks philosophy ‘has taken the *value* of these “values”, as given, as a fact, as beyond all calling-into-question’ (GM Preface 6). This assumption of givenness stands in the way of a revaluation of those values since it embodies a further assumption, namely that there is no other evaluative framework – no alternative ‘morality’ – against which to compare those values. Our morality, Nietzsche says, ‘stubbornly and ruthlessly declares “I am morality itself and nothing else is moral!”’ (BGE 202). Alternative behaviours are viewed just as immoral, rather than embodying an alternative morality. The genealogy shows the contingency of our morality, hence dispelling its uniqueness, by showing how it can be seen to grow out of an alternative morality.

First Treatise: ‘Good and Evil’, ‘Good and bad’

Nietzsche subtitles the GM ‘A polemic’ and also writes that it is ‘[a]ppended to the recently published *Beyond Good and Evil* as a supplement and clarification’. Both points are important to understanding the GM, and especially the first treatise. With respect to being a ‘polemic’, a striking feature of Nietzsche’s writing here (and elsewhere) is its particularly rhetorical and emotive style and choice of words. Nietzsche talks of ‘masters’ and ‘slaves’, calling the former ‘noble’, ‘high-natured of soul’, and other glowing things, whilst the slaves are ‘deprived’, ‘ugly’, ‘deformed’, ‘sickly’, and full of hate and feelings of revenge. Readers tend to react to such language in various ways, but hardly ever neutrally: his prose here elicits various emotional reactions. And, whilst a cursory reading might suggest that Nietzsche sides with the masters against the slaves, matters are more ambiguous on a more careful reading. The masters are ‘terrible’, the slaves are ‘intelligent’ and the architects of the ‘most sublime kind of love’. Nietzsche’s rhetoric is not accidental, but reflects something central in his philosophy. He thinks that humans are collections of ‘drives’ or causal tendencies towards certain ends, and that our behaviour and thoughts are expressions of these drives. These aims constitutes our values, our respective ‘Yesses’ and ‘Noes’, as Nietzsche puts it. Drives are also connected with ‘affects’, both positive and negative feelings. This picture of the self stands in contrast to the idea that selves are simple, unitary things, and that this self has rational control over its wants and desires. Now, why Nietzsche’s language is so emotive is to try to evoke in the reader the multiplicity different, and conflicting, drives that constitute that person, getting behind the illusion of a disinterested spectator (see also the Third Treatise).

With respect to supplementing *Beyond Good and Evil*, as the title of the First Treatise suggests, the GM contributes to the project of going beyond a morality centred on a contrast between the evaluative poles of 'good' and 'evil'. The First Treatise concerns itself precisely with the emergence of such a morality from a different morality, one pivoted on a contrast between 'good' and 'bad'. This morality, 'master morality', Nietzsche identifies as pre-Christian morality (and a form of non-Christian morality present in non-Western cultures). The good (*gut*) in this morality is exemplified by, variously, Homeric heroes, Roman nobles, and Japanese nobility. The various forms of good include nobility itself, abundant health, wealth, and aristocratic power. The contrast term for good Nietzsche uses in this value system is '*schlecht*', which has a multiplicity of meanings which mark an absence of the goods possessed by the (few) masters and the many who lack the fortune of the masters, and whom Nietzsche dubs the 'slaves'. The 'slaves' are those who base, low, ugly, sick, powerless, ignoble. Nietzsche offers both etymological and historical support in favour of this evaluative world and an explanation of how it becomes supplanted by the morality of good and evil (*böse*).

This 'conceptual transformation' (GM I: 4) is the result of what Nietzsche calls the 'slave revolt in morality' (GM 1: 7). This is an 'imaginary' revolt, a matter of creating a new table of values to supplant the morality of good and bad. This transformation is in effect a matter of inverting the prior table of values. That is to say, weakness, lowliness, powerlessness and all else that characterizes those occupying the bad pole of this evaluative contrast become conceptualized as good. Powerlessness without retaliation is conceived as kindness, and cowardice becomes patience. The masters, in turn, become conceptualized as 'evil', and this brings us to another important contrast between the two moralities. The good and bad in master morality are not linked to the notions of intention, choice, and desert. The masters do not choose to be well-born, or wealthy, and the slaves do not choose to be powerless or sick. Each instead occupy different spaces in fortune. The masters themselves are indifferent to the suffering or interests of the slaves but, crucially, that is not something that reflects any moral defect of the masters but is simply the 'right' of the noble class and the misfortune of the slaves. In connection with this, Nietzsche exploits the metaphor of birds of prey and lambs (GM 1:16). The birds eat the lambs and the lambs feel anger at the birds, but the birds just treat the lambs as prey and the lambs do not view the birds as acting out of malicious intentions. Instead, the birds are expressing their nature as carnivores. Part of the slave revolt involves reconceptualizing this relationship by thinking not of the masters as simply expressing the dominant natures, but instead as expressing a moral choice to connive at intentional wrong doing, a choice that expresses an independent self 'behind' their deeds, and, in turn, makes them the proper object of moral blame.

This conceptual transformation that is the 'slave revolt' is the result of the slaves lowly position and their psychological reaction to it. The slaves are incapable for various reasons of taking command of their situation, not least because of their position with respect to the masters. This produces a deeply painful reaction of anger and hatred which Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. Unable to vent this *ressentiment* directly, the slave adopt, unconsciously, a strategy to relieve themselves of it by conceiving themselves to be morally superior to the masters, and interpret their own suffering as a test and mark of their virtue. Put bluntly, real revenge is not possible so an unconscious imaginary revenge takes its place. The phenomenon of conceiving of something as less valuable than it really is when the thinker is somehow in some adverse relationship with that thing is a plausible and relatively familiar one, and goes under the name of 'sour grapes'. Thus, for example, I might fail to get a job and my anger at doing so might make me come to tell myself that the job was not a good one anyway. It is plausible to think that such a tendency is a common one in those Nietzsche identifies with the 'slaves'. But this might all seem a rather tenuous basis for a 'slave revolt in morality'. However, account Nietzsche offers in the First Treatise is an incomplete one. The case becomes more powerful when bring in a different character type Nietzsche dubs the 'priest', and, whilst the type is introduced in the First Treatise, the role of the priest only really becomes apparent in the Third.

Second Treatise: 'Guilt', 'Bad Conscience' and Related Matters

This part of the GM concerns, as its title suggests, the phenomena of guilt and bad conscience. It begins with a question, namely how is it possible to 'breed an animal that is permitted to make promises', which Nietzsche says is the 'true problem of man' (GM II: 1). He offers a brief account of how that problem is answered by hypothesizing habits established by pain, which (somehow) lead inexorably to the emergence of the 'sovereign individual', a figure who has the 'right to make promises' and in whom there exists a 'conscience', a 'proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility'. (GM II.2) After a few more comments about this elusive character, Nietzsche appears to change topic and introduces the notion of bad conscience and guilt ('that other "gloomy thing"' (GM II. 4)). This is followed by a discussion of a number of different topics, most notably punishment and the relationship between debtor and creditor. At section 16 Nietzsche offers his hypothesis about the origin of bad conscience, which involves human beings internalizing their own cruelty, which leads to the creation of what man 'later calls his "soul"' (GM II.16). The debtor-creditor relationship becomes joined with bad conscience and is transformed into guilt, which in turn becomes entangled with a undischageable debt to God.

This part of the GM is the most difficult and controversial of the whole work. Rather the start at the beginning, it is easier to begin with Nietzsche's explanation of bad conscience and work from that. Roughly speaking, bad conscience is a painful form of negative self-awareness, a troublesome negative evaluation of one's own self. Nietzsche calls it 'an illness', but one akin to pregnancy since it is a painful process that gives birth to something. What is born from bad conscience is *personhood*, or what man 'later calls his "soul"' (GM II.16). To understand this, consider some of the differences between a conscious animal, such as a cat, and an adult human being. A cat is conscious of his environment, and is capable learning regular behavioural patterns. For example, he can learn to use his litter tray or extract his treats from his toy. But, unlike the human, the cat doesn't *evaluate* himself or his behaviour, nor does he act in light of such evaluations. He doesn't think that it is the *right* thing to do to use his litter box and use it because it is the right thing to do. Nor does he feel himself a failure if he fails to extract his treats. What is absent in the cat, and present in the human, is an awareness of norms and standards and an evaluative awareness of oneself as meeting or failing to meet those norms and standards. Bad conscience makes the 'entire inner world' so that consciousness has 'taken on depth, breadth and height', which involves a 'forceful separation from his animal past' (GM II: 16).

How does this occur? Nietzsche identifies in the human animal a powerful instinct to cruelty, a delight in inflicting suffering. Nietzsche hypothesizes that the external venting of that instinct becomes frustrated when human groups become subjugated by others. The instinct becomes turned in on the possessors, which he results in what he calls 'the internalization of man' (GM II: 16). Cruelty becomes directed at one's self and this manifests itself in terms of coruscating self-hatred, which brings with it heightened self-awareness. The bad in 'bad conscience' is the horrible self-hatred, and the conscience is the evaluative self-awareness.

How does this relate to guilt? Guilt, roughly speaking, as a painful awareness of moral one's failure. Whilst bad conscience tortures one about the general kind of person you are, guilt tends to focus on particular things one has done (or has failed to do). Nietzsche finds the origins of guilt in the non-moral relationship between creditor and debtor. Here he envisages another role for the disposition to cruelty. If a debtor fails to repay a loan, the creditor can take equivalent value by venting his cruelty (getting his pound of flesh) upon the debtor. This relationship is not to be conceived as the creditor punishing the debtor, just as a bailiff confiscating property in lieu of unpaid loans is not punishing the debtor but merely recovering the debt. This relationship offers bad conscience another opportunity for cruelty. A particular action, or failure to act, is conceived as a

failure to meet a debt and the cruelty that is the payment is again self-directed. This relationship is, Nietzsche speculates, is also conceived as involving debt to one's ancestors, and the debt grows as the as the importance of the ancestor is magnified. This magnification continues until the ancestors are conceived as gods, increasing the guilt. But whereas, says Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks could cope with guilt and bad conscience by using their gods to keep both 'at arm's length' (GM II: 23), Christianity implies the debt, and hence the guilt, are undischageable given that the Christian god sacrificed his own son for humanity.

We shall revisit guilt when discussing the Third Treatise, but what of the 'conscience' of the 'sovereign individual'? This is controversial figure, with some commentators seeing Nietzsche's use of this figure as a way of mocking modern liberal ideals, whereas others see it as exemplifying Nietzsche's ideal. We know that bad conscience is temporally prior to evaluative self-consciousness, and so the sovereign's conscience emerges from bad conscience. But whereas bad conscience involves a negative evaluation of our natures ('the suffering of man from man, from himself' (GM II: 16)), the sovereign individual's conscience is a 'proud' awareness of himself.

Third Treatise: What do Ascetic Ideals mean?

The opening section of the Third Treatise constitutes a summary of that treatise. Nietzsche is asking what ascetic ideals mean to various types, including artists, philosophers, woman, the 'physiologically failed and out of sorts' (i.e. the vast majority of people), and to the priests and saints. For artist it can mean nothing or different things, and for philosophers a condition of their flourishing. Here, however, we shall focus on the priest, a character type introduced in the First Treatise.

First, however, we must briefly discuss GM III: 12, which is the central text of what is known as Nietzsche's 'perspectivism'. Here Nietzsche wants us to shed ourselves of a view of objectivity as involving a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge' upon whom the world impresses itself, yielding knowledge of how the world really is, a subject without interests and who is a passive mirror to reality. Rather than holding that we get the best conception of the world by disengaging our interests or 'affects', we should instead bring to bear multiple, and possibly conflicting, interests. A useful analogy to interests relate to how we represent the world is that of a map of a city. The map represents a city, but which aspects? That depends on what the map is for. A military map is going to highlight that which is of strategic interest (rivers, bridges, fortifications), whereas a tourist map will highlight different places, and a map for shopping will, in turn, highlight different places. When more and more interests are included then more and more different aspects become salient: 'the more affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, [then] much more complete will our "concept" of this matter, our "objectivity" will be'.

Let us turn to the acetic ideals. In this context, an ideal is a conception of the best kind of human existence. The ascetic component Nietzsche holds be expressed in 'three great pomp words' (GM III: 8), poverty, chastity, and humility. All three of these the injunction to devalue things that we might take human beings naturally to desire, namely material goods, the satisfaction of bodily appetites, and the general valuation of one's self over others. Such virtues of self-denial are associated with religious practice, including the various forms of Christianity with which Nietzsche was concerned, though, as we shall see, he sees asceticism as underlying modern secular morality.

Nietzsche locates the origin of asceticism in the particular psychological type that is the priest. One with a priestly psychology is a sensitive, contemplative type, one who is so struck with the suffering bound up in existence he becomes 'hostile to life' (GM III: 11) and exhibits a tendency to a 'suicidal [nihilism](#)' (GM III: 28). What the priest, and humanity in general, require is not an end to

suffering but a meaning to it: it is 'the meaninglessness of suffering, [that] was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity' (GM III: 28), and the ascetic priest managed to invent an interpretation of existence that provided such a meaning. To justify their own horror at the world and their withdrawal from it, they reinterpret these dispositions as been drawn towards a better, non-earthly, realm of existence, and where all the suffering in this world is redeemed. This world becomes devalued and a different world affirmed, and the objects of natural desire become viewed as morally bad.

This interpretation of existence fits well with the values produced by the slave revolt. Their suffering and lowly position, their meekness, can be given further valorisation by seeing this as part of the trials to enter heaven. It also adds justification for the downgrading of the master morality, where high value was placed on wealth, splendour and dominance. But the priestly interpretation of existence brings something further. Recall that the slave's *ressentiment* was directed at the masters, and gave birth to values. What the priestly interpretation adds is the redirection of *ressentiment* towards the sufferers themselves in an effort to make sense of the guilt that the slaves feel. But in doing so the overall amount of suffering is increased since guilt is further increased.

Nietzsche holds that our values are secular versions of those promoted by the ascetic ideal, values that promote selflessness, altruism, pity, and benevolence. These are accepted uncritically and it is these which we need revalue. But this is not a simple matter of rejecting the Christian interpretation of existence. First, Nietzsche thinks, many of his explicitly atheist contemporaries have rejected Christianity but not thought through its implications for our moral system, taking such morality as simply self-evident (they hate the Church, but 'love the poison' (GM I: 9)). Second, humanity stands in need of an ideal since it has a standing need to make sense of inevitable suffering, and the ascetic ideal is the only one humanity has been given. From GM III: 23, Nietzsche considers what appears to be an alternative ideal, that of modern secular science, and its fearless pursuit of truth 'at any price'. Those who purport to adhere to this ideal include the 'knowers' Nietzsche mentions in the very first sentence of the preface. Nietzsche, however, claims that the value of 'we knowers', namely their faith in science, is, in fact, the 'latest and most noble' expression of the ascetic ideal (GM III: 23). We knowers are unknown to ourselves because, Nietzsche thinks, this has gone unrealized. Precisely *why* this is so is a difficult and controversial issue. But a clue can be found in the *Gay Science* in a section entitled 'In what way we too are pious' (GS 144). Nietzsche here suggests that the will to truth at any price rests on a prior notion that one should not deceive anyone, and particularly not one's self. This moral imperative becomes transformed into a categorical demand for truth any price. Ironically, however, it is this will to truth that undermines belief in the Christian god, which in turn is what underwrites the ascetic ideal. The worry for Nietzsche is that this leads to nihilism, the view that existence has no value at all. Hence we are at a stage where we 'sacrifice God for nothingness – that paradoxical mystery of the final cruelty has been reserved for the race that is now approaching' (BGE 257). We are left, then, with a need for a counter-ideal to the ascetic ideal if we are not to plunge into the abyss of nihilism.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Why does Nietzsche approach morality genealogically?
2. How does the 'slave revolt in morality' occur?
3. How does Nietzsche explain the emergence of bad conscience?
4. How does Nietzsche explain the presence of the ascetic ideal?
5. Why is Nietzsche concerned about suffering?

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