

Friedrich Nietzsche
The Genealogy of Morals

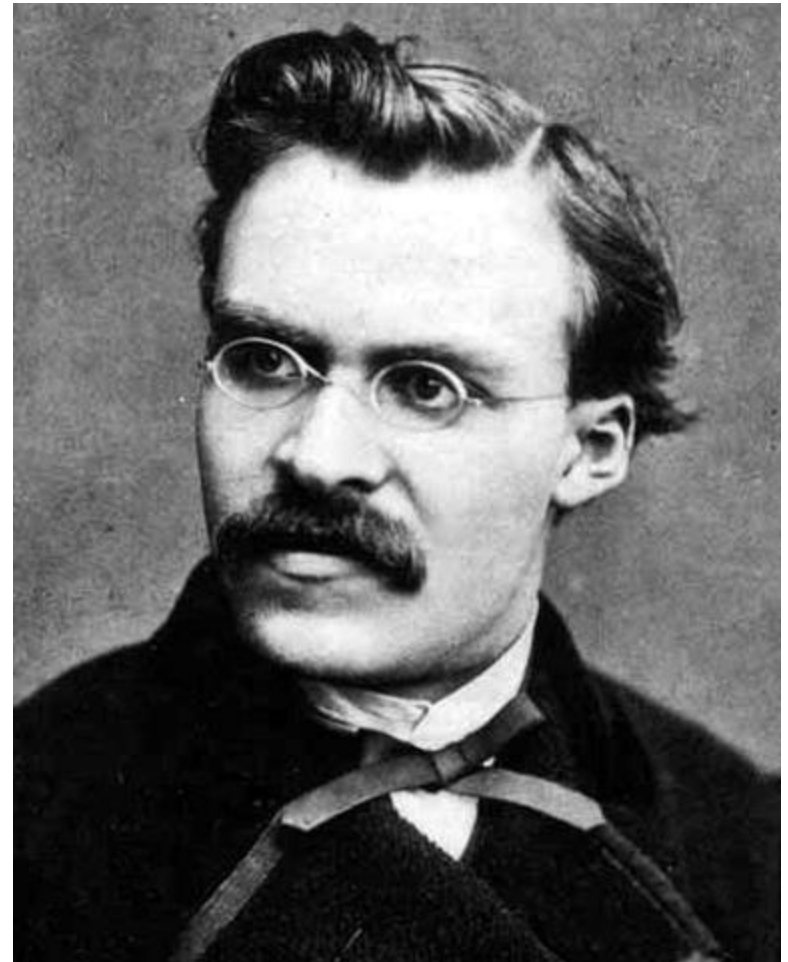
A Transvaluation of All Values

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Our reading is taken from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*; it is the entire text from Book One, entitled: "Good and Bad" "Good and Evil".

Published in 1887, the *Genealogy* is perhaps Nietzsche's most widely referenced work, and the one that seems to get the most attention (in academic and non-academic circles).

Perhaps this overemphasis is a bit unfair, and the *Genealogy* is best appreciated in light of Nietzsche's other works (I will make reference to, and utilize these in my audio lecture).



Nietzsche and Christianity

Despite being one of Christianity's most formidable and outspoken opponents, this was not originally in the cards. Nietzsche was born into a very pious family (a long line of Lutheran ministers). He studied theology and philology (study of ancient texts and languages). In the course of his studies, Nietzsche became a staunch atheist, but we should guard ourselves against the conception that Nietzsche was wholeheartedly opposed to religion. It would be an oversimplification to say that Nietzsche was anti-religious and thought that religion was always bad or that religious people were just idiots.



Nietzsche actually had a deep admiration and respect for what he called the "religious spirit", but at the same time he warns us of the trappings that attend to, or the stagnation that results from, religious types (or those who would follow "religious drives").

A Transvaluation Of All Values

Nietzsche calls for a "Transvaluation of All Values", a questioning of all morality hitherto (that is, all historical forms of Western morality leading up to 19th-century Europe).

Nietzsche poses the following questions regarding these systems of morality:

- On what principles are these moralities based
- Under what conditions did this morality arise?
- From which individual or group of individuals did this morality originate? And why?

Quoting from the preface of the *Genealogy* (not included in your handout):

"Under what conditions did man construct the value judgments good and evil? And what is there intrinsic worth? Have they thus far benefited or retarded mankind? Do they betoken misery, curtailment, degeneracy or, on the contrary, power, fullness of being, energy, courage in the face of life, and confidence in the future?"

Nietzsche's answers to these questions, it must be warned, might be offensive or even shocking to the average reader (and perhaps even to Nietzsche himself).

Is Nietzsche A Cultural Relativist?

Remember that Cultural Relativism is the belief that all morals are determined by, and originate from, cultural settings, customs, and norms. If Nietzsche is discussing a history, or "genealogy", of morals, then does this make him a Cultural Relativist? Well...Yes and No (the answer is not so simple).

YES - Nietzsche does believe that morals/values are "created" under certain circumstances,

BUT

NO - There are more (or less) appropriate/beneficial reactions to these conditions (some falter and are crushed, others thrive and increase in strength and vitality).

Many refer to Nietzsche's philosophical/ethical position as Perspectivism...

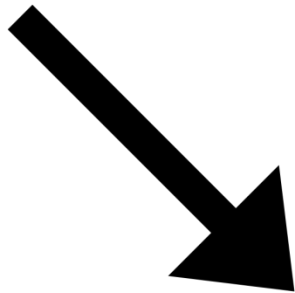
Relativism vs. Perspectivism

Relativism - Truth is relative (no over-arching truth, it's all subjective or cultural in origin).

Perspectivism - There is such a thing as Truth, but we all have a unique *perspective* or view of it (other views are inaccessible or shut off from us).

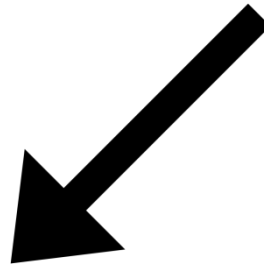
RELATIVISM

Subject/Ego



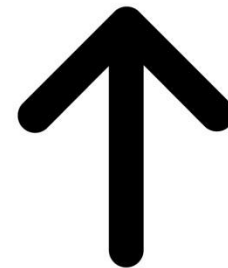
"truth"

Subject/Ego



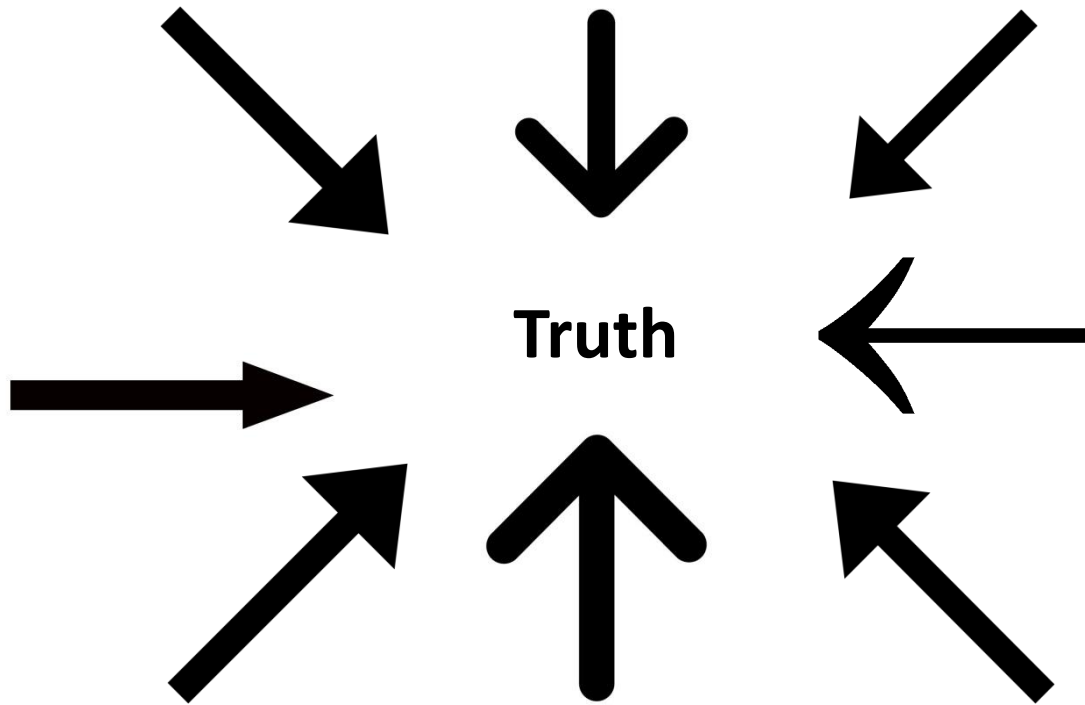
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"truth"



Subject/Ego

Perspectivism



According to Nietzsche, some of us lose sight of this and think that our perspective is the only one (or rather that our view is an all-encompassing, "objective" one). We often think there is an all-encompassing truth that we all have access to, and that we are all accountable/beholden to (in an ethical sense).

Oftentimes, claims Nietzsche, this denial of perspective is a reaction to the messiness or the chaotic nature of the world (the world of "becoming" as Plato would say, versus the world of "being"--Plato's ideal world of Forms).

Nietzsche apparently wants us to give up this urge for perfection (the "God's eye view") and embrace life "warts and all".

English Psychologists

It is unclear exactly who Nietzsche is referring to at the beginning of Essay One of the *Genealogy* when he refers to "these English psychologists."

In his preface, Nietzsche mentions Paul Rée's work *The Origin of Moral Perceptions* as exemplifying "the English variety" of "genealogical hypothesis."

But Rée, who had at one time been a friend of Nietzsche's, was not British (he was German), nor did he consider himself a psychologist. Apparently, Nietzsche felt that Rée's work exemplified the "English" genealogical account of morality that is critiqued in the early parts of the first essay.

English Psychologists

Well, what exactly is the account that we get from the "British psychologists"? And why does Nietzsche refer to them as "psychologists" (rather than "ethicists" or "philosophers")?

And why, according to Nietzsche, are they (these "psychologists") more interesting than their books? (Is he just making a joke here, or is there some deeper philosophical point he is trying to make?)

He acknowledges that "the British" *are* willing to bend even if what results is the "homespun, severe, ugly, obnoxious, un-Christian, un-moral truth. For such truths do exist." (pg. 159)

The English Account of the Good

According to Nietzsche, the "English psychologists" provide the following account of the "good": (1) altruistic acts were praised by the receiver (by those who found the acts "useful", (2) the origin of praise was forgotten, and (3) such actions were felt to be good simply because it was customary to commend them (a "habit" was formed based on "error").

The following elements:

- utility
- forgetfulness
- habit
- error

make this account appropriately "English", thinks Nietzsche. They are trying to be humble in their accounts and in doing so portray mankind in a negative light as base and forgetful. In doing so, Nietzsche wonders if they have succeeded in debunking "value" (by exposing its "base" origins).

The English Account of the Good

Nietzsche turns the English account on its head, and claims that the value judgment "good" did not originate from those to whom the "good" has been done. Rather, it was the "good" themselves (the noble/mighty/highly-placed/high-minded) who decreed themselves and their actions to be "good" (belonging to the highest rank as opposed to all that was base/low-minded/plebeian). So opposites "good" and "bad" originate in nobility.

Political vs. Spiritual Supremacy

According to Nietzsche's account of morality, political supremacy can often give rise to "spiritual" supremacy, especially if the ruling class is a priestly caste. In this case, terms like "pure" and "impure" are used to denote social status or class. "Good" and "bad" no longer refer to class.

But Nietzsche says that in their rudimentary phases, these type of "spiritual" oligarchies utilize a much simpler, much more innocent conception of "purity/impurity" (e.g. the pure washed themselves, refused to eat certain foods, did not sleep with unwashed women, held blood in abomination, etc).

Political vs. Spiritual Supremacy

Given the peculiar nature of the priestly caste, it becomes clear, notes Nietzsche, how value oppositions (good/bad, pure/impure) turn inward and become exacerbated. (Human drives and passions are directed at the "inner world" instead of finding expression in the "external"). He finds something "unwholesome" about priestly aristocracies, about their way of life. They turn away from action and sway between "brooding and emotional explosions."

But haven't the "priestly cures" that this caste developed for their morbidity, Nietzsche asks, proven to be more dangerous than the ills themselves? What sort of "cures" is he speaking of?

The Danger of Spiritual "Remedies"

Humanity, Nietzsche claims, still suffers from these priestly "cures":

- certain forms of diet (e.g. abstinence from meat)
- fasting
- sexual continence
- escape "into the desert" (asceticism)
- anti-sensual metaphysics (think Plato/Socrates)
- utter satiety and its radical remedy: nothingness

"And at last, supervening on all this, comes utter satiety, together with its radical remedy, nothingness--or God, for the desire for a mystical union with God is nothing other than the Buddhist's desire to sink himself in nirvana." (pg. 166)

Why does Nietzsche call God "nothingness"? What could he mean by this? How does this idea compare to the Buddhist's conception of *nirvana* (an end to all suffering and change)?

The Danger of Spiritual "Remedies"

Nietzsche also makes the point that, among the priests, everything becomes more dangerous (NOTE: for Nietzsche, this is not necessarily a bad thing).

Arrogance, vindictiveness, love, desire for power, disease: all of these become more "dangerous" in a religious context. Why, do you think, does Nietzsche make this claim? Why are these made more dangerous in the context of religion?

Nietzsche does acknowledge, however, that only on this priestly soil has man been able to grow into an "interesting creature" (more profound, more "evil"; in these two respects man has shown his superiority over the rest of creation).

Aristocratic Values vs. Priestly Values

For Nietzsche, "aristocratic values" presuppose a strong physique, blooming--even exuberant--health, together with the condition that guarantees the preservation of this health: combat, adventure, "the chase", "the dances", war games, etc.

"Priestly values", he says, presuppose impotence. This is what makes the priests the most evil enemies to have.

Why would Nietzsche say this? Wouldn't their impotence entail harmlessness?

Nietzsche says that "the greatest haters" [and the most intelligent] have been priests. Beside the "brilliance of priestly vengeance, all other brilliance fades." And "human history would be dull and stupid if not for the intelligence furnished by these 'impotents'."

Aristocratic Values vs. Priestly Values

A "slave revolt" began in morality when the rancor of the lower classes turned creative and gave birth to values. Beings who were deprived of an outlet compensate by an "imaginary vengeance". What does Nietzsche mean by "imaginary vengeance" here? What is he talking about? Why "imaginary"?

For Nietzsche, what he calls the "noble morality" grows out of triumphant self-affirmation, whereas "slave ethics" begins by saying "no" to an "outside", an "other", a non-self, and this "no" is the first creative act of "slave morality".

Psychologically speaking, slave morality requires an outside stimulus in order to act at all; all action is reaction. The opposite is true of aristocratic values--such values grow and act spontaneously, seeking out contraries in order to affirm themselves. Under "noble morality", negative concepts like humble, base, and bad are counterpoints of the positive.

Noble Morality vs. Slave Morality

Aristocratic values may go amiss or do violence to reality, but this only happens with regard to spheres they do not know well or from knowledge of which they guard themselves (i.e. the sphere of the "common man"; nobles are often a poor judge of this).

But on the other hand, even when this "looking down" falsifies a bit, it is nothing compared to the falsification which "oppressed hatred" and "impotent vindictiveness" effects on its opponent (what Nietzsche refers to as *ressentiment*). The noble morality does not make its opponent a "monster" or a caricature. There is a certain respect for one's enemy on the side of the noble, while the enemy is seen as "evil" (not just "bad") by the slave morality (through eyes of resentment).

Noble Morality vs. Slave Morality

For the noble morality, happiness is never divorced from action (we see traces of this in Aristotle's description of happiness as an activity--not a state of being). For the slave morality, happiness is inaction (a "drugged tranquility" as Nietzsche puts it).

The noble morality first creates the value judgment "good", then derives "bad" from it ("bad" is a by-product, an after-thought). Under slave morality, the value judgment "evil" is created out of resentment/hatred; this is the original creative act of slave ethics.

Evaluations of "good" are different for both moralities. What is "good" according to the noble is precisely what is deemed "bad/evil" by the slave.

Noble Morality vs. Slave Morality

Here is a quick overview/re-cap of the two moralities Nietzsche describes:

Noble Morality (Greco-Roman Values)	Slave Morality (Socrates, Platonism, Judeo-Christian Values)
spontaneous	reactive (negation is the first creative act; "nihilistic")
happiness as an activity	happiness is a state of being (a "drugged tranquility"--nihilism again)
frank/open/candid, even in respect to one's own shortcomings	secretive/concealing
respect for enemy	vile contempt for enemy (they are seen as "evil"--not just bad)
encouragement of instincts	distrust of instincts, accompanied with a sharpness of wit (<i>physiological</i> impotence forces <i>intellectual</i> rigor to develop in defense)

Conclusion

Nietzsche poses the question: "Has the slave morality improved culture/civilization?" In certain respects, he acknowledges that it has (it's made mankind more "profound"), but ultimately he leans towards a negative response.

On pg. 76, he asks "Who would not prefer fear accompanied by admiration to security accompanied by the loathsome sight of perversion, dwarfishness, and degeneracy?"

When Nietzsche speaks of "fear accompanied by admiration", he is obviously referring to the noble morality. He acknowledges that the slave morality may provide more "security" for society, but that is accompanied by a "loathsome sight." This is the state of things today (in Nietzsche's 19th-century Europe), and there is a repugnance towards mankind that stems, not from our fear of man, but from the fact "there is nothing to be feared from him." (Man is "tame", "mediocre", "savorless").

Nietzsche asks a meta-ethical question towards the end of the first essay of the *Genealogy*: What is most valuable: (1) the longest survival for the species, or (2) the development of a more powerful type?

Some have interpreted Nietzsche as saying that we should revert back to the noble morality. What do you think, based on your reading?