

Notes for a Discussion of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*

Session I

General Topic of Discussion: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* I

Outline of Discussion

1. Perspectivalism
2. What is a Polemical Genealogy of Morality?
3. The Rise of Slave Morality
4. The Invention of Good and Evil
5. Living under Slave Morality

Flow of Discussion

- We introduced ourselves to Nietzsche by discussing the author's perspectivalism. Nietzsche's aphorisms don't aim at a systematically holistic view of reality. Rather, they're a series of explorations of various perspectives on reality and their potential interrelations. We, too, have to recognize and even correct our own perspective so as to get at what Nietzsche's texts are trying to do, rather than dwelling in received stereotypes about him.
- We then broke down the title of Nietzsche's work—*On the Genealogy of Morality: a Polemic*—in order to get at some of its underlying notions. A genealogy, it seemed to us, would not simply be a history of events, but an account of physical development. Attention would have to be paid to inheritance—what we inherit, but also how multiple notions can mingle together so as to give birth new ones. A genealogy would trace ancestry back towards a perhaps-unreachable origin, thereby approaching human self-knowledge through a series of uncomfortable inheritances. What makes Nietzsche's work a 'polemic' is that it's an attempt to unveil what he calls the slavish origins of morality, which have been covered over by popular history.
- Turning our attention to morality, we asked ourselves: is Nietzsche questioning particular moral values, or is he after the very idea of moral valuation of such? 'Good and evil' names one specific set of values, with its own genealogy which can be explored—but there could also quite easily be other decisive values. Humans are valuing animals—we can't stop valuing, but we can explore the history and the forces lying behind the values that obtain in any particular context.
- R. then started us off with a passage from aphorism 10 on p. 19: "Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says 'no' to an 'outside,' to a 'different,' to a 'not-self:' and this 'no' is its creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance—this necessary direction toward the outside instead of back onto oneself—belongs to the very nature of *ressentiment*: in order to come into being, slave-morality always needs and opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all—its action is, from the ground up, reaction. The reverse is the case with the noble manner of valuation: it acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks out its opposite only in order to say 'yes' to itself still more gratefully and more jubilantly—its negative concept 'low'

‘common’ ‘bad’ is only an after-birth, a pale contrast-image in relation to its positive basic concept, saturated through and through with life and passion: ‘we noble ones, we good ones, we beautiful ones, we happy ones!’”

- In this passage, Nietzsche relates what he calls ‘slave morality’ to *ressentiment*, reaction, and negation. Noble morality, on the other hand, would correspond to spontaneous action and the affirmation of life. *Ressentiment*, for its part, is the perpetual hatred the ruled hold against the rulers. They then take noble values and recast them as “evil,” as punishable in some other realm, despite all this-worldly appearances.
- This, then, is the slave revolt in morality. The weak, the poor, the suffering are alone considered to be ‘good,’ while the inverse are considered ‘evil.’ But for the noble, their own positive action is simply good, while other forms of action are merely ‘bad,’ though not worthy of scorn or even consideration. There’s no longing for comeuppance. ‘Bad’ is seldom even used to categorize humans as such, as opposed to characteristics or activities.
- But for the underclass, the slaves, retaliation remains necessary—yet it could only be a delayed, even transcendent vengeance. For all this, though, Nietzsche maintains that it’s the slave revolt in morality that makes humankind ‘interesting...’
- This revolt is also tied to an erroneous conception of what it is to be human or even just to ‘be’ at all. Human power just is its own expression—human activity cannot be isolated from a supposedly underlying human subject or soul. The slave morality, though, presumes such a separation—it needs to posit a human nature that could potentially bear any kind of properties or acts. Nietzsche denies this. The powerful merely enact their power; there is no neutral substratum that merely bears the attribute of ‘power’ on some contingent basis. Here Nietzsche is questioning the very notion of a “moral subject.”
- What he isn’t saying, though, is that we should go back to some primal stage of violent nobility. The slave morality is what makes us interesting, self-aware, intellectually complex. It revalues the values of society. It defines ‘good’ in opposition to what is first termed ‘evil,’ whereas prior that the noble had defined ‘good’ positively, on its own terms, and then derived ‘bad’ out of that. ‘Good and evil’ thus really is a different table of values than ‘good and bad.’
- At this point of Western history, though, Nietzsche suggests that we’re all pretty much slaves in our morality. We’re all subjects under a regime of good and evil. We can’t just step out of this regime—and yet it does remain but a phase in a greater process or development, and so there is at least the potential for change on the horizon. A future revaluation of all values remains possible.

Session II

General Topic of Discussion: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* II

Outline of Discussion

6. Humanity as the Valuing Animal
7. Promising & Remembering as Keys to the Creditor-Debtor Relation
8. Against Social Contract Theory
9. From Making-Suffer to Bad Conscience
10. What To Do About Bad Conscience

Flow of Discussion

- B. got us started with a quotation from Aphorism 8 on p. 45: “Making prices, gauging values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging—this preoccupied man’s very first thinking to such an extent that it is in a certain sense thinking itself: here that oldest kind of acumen was bred, here likewise we may suspect the first beginnings of human pride, man’s feeling of pre-eminence with respect to other creatures. Perhaps our word ‘man’ (*manas*) still expresses precisely something of this self-esteem: man designated himself as the being who measures values, who values and measures, as the ‘appraising animal in itself.’”
- So, according to Nietzsche, the human is the animal that values and measures. What defines our life-experience is how we evaluate and appraise our world and ourselves. We order, we rank. This isn’t just one of our many activities—it’s our driving and defining function. Many or perhaps even all of our relationships can then be explained in terms of value and exchange, via the creditor-debtor relation especially.
- But a credit-debit relation can only obtain for an animal that can make promises—that is, one that can willingly bind itself to a future. To understand what it means to “owe” requires the ability both to promise and to remember. Owing incorporates obligations to both the future and the past. According to Nietzsche, this is both the privilege and the prison of human consciousness.
- By managing their pasts and futures in this way, humans have striven to make themselves ‘regular,’ like clockwork. They need to be calculable and therefore predictable. But this goal is achieved, according to Nietzsche, through force, pain, and cruelty. Memories are burned into human minds through what he calls our violent “mnemo-technique.”
- Social institutions, too, can be understood in terms of this creditor-debtor relation. A state, for example, could be seen as the creditor to its many debtor-citizens. Yet Nietzsche doesn’t go in for social contract theory. For him, the true origin of the state could only be the violent artistry of the blond beast, not an agreement among equals that takes them out of the state of nature.
- Social contract theory would also seem to presuppose that humans are promise-making and promise-keeping. What Nietzsche’s interested in, though, is how we get to be promise-making in the first place—how we become contractual. The value of such contracts might not originally be mutual benefit, but instead the power or right of making-suffer—the pleasure of punishment for the punisher.

- While Nietzsche would disagree with Hobbes on the social contract, we decided, he probably would agree with Hobbes' characterization of humankind as violent. For Nietzsche, though, society doesn't escape from force, but rather channels or even intensifies it.
- From this foundational urge to make suffer, Nietzsche brings us to his concept of bad conscience. This is what results when the urge to make suffer is turned back on our own selves. This is the origin of the ascetic impulse. Violence against oneself burns memories into our own consciousness and we call this 'conscience.' Under the ascetic regime of 'good and evil,' pain becomes good; self-denial and self-sacrifice are affirmed, while life is negated. Internalized self-cruelty is what drives this whole process.
- When bad conscience and guilt are brought to their highest point of development, humanity stands before its highest possible creditor—'God.' First developed out of the idea of debt to one's ancestors, 'god' reached perfection—so says Nietzsche—in Christianity's doctrine of a God who died 'for you.' Even when we stop taking theology seriously, as Nietzsche thought was already the case in his time, we still feel guilty before some almighty creditor. The sense of sin seems to outlive even our belief in God.
- The very idea of God or gods would appear to have developed out of a prior sense of guilt. Religion merely heightens bad conscience and intensifies the ways we make ourselves suffer. But what would it mean to have a good conscience? What would it mean, we asked, to fully affirm life? Given what Nietzsche says about guilt outliving God, atheism would seem to be an insufficient answer here. Instead, he points us to the idea of a future hope—not in heaven, but in a revaluation of all values. Perhaps the remnants of our bad conscience could be attached to other-worldly and life-denying thoughts and practices—to the values we currently feel so good about, but which in fact conceal our underlying and motivating self-hatred.