

On the Self-Undermining Functionality Critique of Morality

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Abstract

Nietzsche's injunction to examine "the value of values" can be heard in a pragmatic key, as inviting us to consider not whether certain values are *true*, but what they *do* for us. This oddly neglected pragmatic approach to Nietzsche now receives authoritative support from Bernard Reginster's new book, which offers a compelling and notably cohesive interpretation of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In this essay, I reconstruct Reginster's account of Nietzsche's critique of morality as a "self-undermining functionality critique" and raise three problems for it: (i) Is there room within an etiological conception of function for the notion of self-undermining functionality? (ii) If Nietzsche's critique is internal and based solely on the function it ascribes to morality, where does that critique derive its normative significance from? (iii) Does Reginster's account not make out ascetic morality to be more universally dysfunctional than it in fact is, given that some priestly types have done remarkably well out of morality?

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ONE way to hear Nietzsche's injunction to examine "the value of values" is in a pragmatic key, as inviting us to consider not whether certain values are *true*, but what they *do* for us. What is a given value's functional role in human life? What needs does it come in to fill, and what consequences does it bring in its wake? By answering these questions, we gain a sense of the value of this particular way of valuing. We grasp its uses and disadvantages for life.

This oddly neglected pragmatic approach to Nietzsche now receives authoritative support from Bernard Reginster's magisterial new book, which will stand as one of the

most compelling and cohesive interpretations of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM). It should be said that I have special reason to welcome its appearance, since it neatly complements my own efforts to articulate the pragmatic aspects of Nietzsche's genealogical method. In *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering* (2021), I argued that the genealogies of truthfulness and justice of Nietzsche's Basel years (1869–79) are designed to reveal the functions performed by those values: they are *pragmatic* genealogies, which is to say inquiries into practical origins aiming to demystify seemingly other-worldly ideals and facilitate their evaluation by exposing how they relate to worldly human needs. Unwittingly paving the way for Reginster's reading of GM, I suggested that while Nietzsche came to recognize that functional hypothesizing about values should be informed by history, because functional diagnoses risk remaining overly simplistic and optimistic if one ignores the contingent developments that lie between the "Darwinian beast" and the "modern milquetoast," his later use of genealogy in GM could be read as *refining* rather than replacing his earlier pragmatic approach. And now, in *The Will to Nothingness* (2021), Reginster develops precisely such a pragmatic reading of GM, arguing that Nietzsche aims to expose and assess the functional role that the Christian moral outlook serves in relation to human needs. It seems that the time is ripe for a new sort of pragmatic reading of Nietzsche.

I say "new" because the sort of pragmatism that has been ascribed to Nietzsche in the past—by interpreters such as René Berthelot, Arthur Danto, and Richard Rorty¹—was the Jamesian pragmatism about truth that gave pragmatism a bad name among the

¹ See Berthelot (1911, 5, 20, 33–59), Danto (2005, 54, 227), and Rorty (2021, ch. 2). A more recent advocate of this line of interpretation is Sinhababu (2017); for a critique of this line of interpretation, see Clark (1990), Williams (2012), and Anderson (2005).

likes of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell.² On this older, and now largely discredited, pragmatic reading of Nietzsche, he “advanced a pragmatic criterion of truth: *p* is true and *q* is false if *p* works and *q* does not” (Danto 2005, 54). Yet, as Nietzsche himself appreciated, the trouble with a conception of truth as “what works” is that it itself does not work.³ It robs the notion of truth of its ability to make a useful difference to human life. For the concern with truth to work for us, it cannot remain conditional on its subservience to the concern with what works for us, but needs to emancipate itself from it: it needs to become an *unconditional* concern. At the same time, it should remain an unconditional concern giving us *pro tanto* reasons alongside other reasons, and not be inflated into a hypertrophic ideal crowding out every other reason. To adopt the attitude of “*fiat veritas pereat vita*” (UM II §4), “let truth prevail though life perish,” would be to turn an originally life-promoting ideal into a life-denying one.

Nietzsche is thus not a Jamesian pragmatist about truth, and Reginster’s book tellingly does without any discussion of Nietzsche’s views on truth and truthfulness. The point is rather that Nietzsche’s thought evinces a pragmatic focus on agency, needs, functions, and consequences.⁴ Indeed, for Reginster, the very objectives animating Nietzsche’s use of the genealogical method are pragmatic in character: Nietzsche resorts to genealogy in order to arrive at (a) a pragmatic diagnosis of morality’s function, and (b) a pragmatic critique of morality in light of that function. In Reginster’s own words, Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality aims “to uncover its function by identifying the

² For a detailed history of the reception of various strands of pragmatism, see Misak (2013, 2016).

³ For a reading of the relevant passages in Nietzsche to this effect, see Queloz (2019, 433–34; 2021, 123–4).

⁴ As comes out already in the interpretations of May (1999, 52), Leiter (2002), and Richardson (2004, 2008), even though they do not set out to offer pragmatic readings of Nietzsche.

particular problems this practice was ‘designed’ to solve” and “to form an assessment of morality by making it possible to ask how well, if at all, it solves these problems” (2021, 12).

In looking at GM through a pragmatic lens, however, the danger is that one will be led to overlook the distinctly *psychological* dimension of the genealogical story: more so than in his earlier attempts at genealogy, Nietzsche pays close attention to the affective states—foremost among them *ressentiment*—that he identifies as lying at the root of moral concepts. Indeed, it was out of a sense that there was an irreducibly psychological dimension to much of GM, and that a pragmatic account was ill-suited to do justice to it, that I myself focused on Nietzsche’s early genealogies, which are more straightforwardly pragmatic in emphasis.

In contrast to the pragmatic approach, sentimentalist approaches to Nietzsche are much better equipped to capture and make sense of the psychological dimension of GM. Guided by Nietzsche’s claim that “moralities are only a sign language of the affects” (BGE §187), the standard sentimentalist reading of Nietzsche maintains that to value something *just is* to feel a certain way towards it—affective states are constitutive of values. Values are then bound to have the same object and valence as their constitutive affects, and the relations between values and affects are epistemically transparent and non-contingent: they are what used to be called “internal” relations, which are intrinsic to the nature of at least one of the relata.

But if pragmatic readings tend to emphasize tangible practical benefits and costs at the expense of the psychological dimensions and motivations behind moral values, sentimentalist readings tend to emphasize affective states and psychological regularities at the expense of the functionality of moral values and their practical *raison d’être*. Both kinds of considerations figure in Nietzsche’s thought, and yet neither approach can do

justice to both. We seem to be left with an uncomfortable trade-off.

The distinctive virtue of Reginster's approach is that it manages to capture both the psychological and the pragmatic aspects of GM. Reginster achieves this by giving sentimentalist readings of Nietzsche a pragmatic twist. According to Reginster's "sentimental pragmatism," Nietzsche's genealogies reveal a type of external relation between values and affects, namely *functional* relations: certain values are shown to be especially well suited to meeting certain affective needs, including the needs for the affects to be expressed or vented. These functional relations between values and affects are likely to be epistemically opaque to us, because the affective states at issue are not necessarily constitutive of the values they are shown to be related to, on this analysis; nor do they necessarily have the same object and valence. And where these functional relations are epistemically opaque to us, genealogical investigation can be informative by rendering them transparent.

The key insight which makes this fusion of sentimentalism and pragmatism possible is that affective states, which are the operative concepts of sentimentalism, can themselves indicate needs and problems, which are the operative concepts of pragmatism. Some needs are emotional or *affective* needs, which are needs for certain affects to be expressed or vented, and these psychological needs can be just as pressing and explanatorily powerful as more obvious physiological needs such as the needs for food, water, and air.

It is in the need manifested by the affective state of *ressentiment* and the urge for revenge, in particular, that Reginster sees the unifying thread running through all three Treatises of GM. This is the affective need to have the world reflect one's will, which is itself rooted in the will to power, which Reginster glosses here as the drive to bend the world to one's will.

Using the exegetical lens provided by this sentimental pragmatism, Reginster interprets Nietzsche as revealing the values of Christian morality to be triply functional in relation to the affective state of *ressentiment*: they help to vent, legitimate, and remedy that affective state. First, the values of Christian morality provide the “man of *ressentiment*” with a discursive way to give voice to his affective state. Second, they offer him a way to make sense of his affective response in vindicatory terms, answering the characteristic urge of creatures who give and ask for reasons to find a feeling’s “*nachträgliches Warum*” (D §34), its “‘Why’ after the fact” or *post hoc* rationalization. And third, the values of Christian morality supply the “man of *ressentiment*” with the means to remedy the feeling of powerlessness that elicited his *ressentiment* in the first place, by showing him a way to feel powerful: the new values reshape and redirect the agent’s will, thereby altering what *counts* as achieving power for the agent in such a way that the agent can come to feel powerful after all. In particular, since the ascetic ideal enshrined in morality devalues well-being and enjoins the repudiation and suppression of one’s natural instincts, the “man of *ressentiment*” who embraces morality can experience voluntary deprivation, mortification, abnegation, and other ways of mastering and overcoming his own natural drives and instincts as manifestations of his power. Here, at last, is a part of the world that he can bend to his will.

Reginster then contends that this function attribution also underpins Nietzsche’s principal complaint about Christian morality, which is at bottom a pragmatic critique of morality by the lights of its function: in virtue of the ascetic ideal it encodes, Christian morality goes some way towards making those who feel powerless feel powerful again; but it only achieves a Pyrrhic victory, because this remedy to the feeling of powerlessness ends up further weakening those who resort to it. For in looking to bend the world to their will by suppressing their drives and instincts, agents destroy their own

“physiological capacity for life” (GM III §11), and thus in effect turn their own will to power against itself. As Reginster describes the relevant dynamics:

Successful compliance with the demands of the ascetic ideal is therefore bound eventually to leave the individual so thoroughly weakened and depleted that he is no longer able to see even the suppression of his natural desires as ... a demonstration of mastery ..., and so to derive from it an increase in his feeling of power. ... [W]hen it seizes upon the ascetic ideal as its vehicle of last resort, the “will to power of the weakest” becomes, in effect, a “will to nothingness” (GM III §28), or a “concealed will to death” (GS §344). (2021, 185–6)

Here, “an attempt is made to employ energy to block up the wells of energy” (GM III §11), as Nietzsche himself puts it. The very vitality that first motivated the adoption of morality thus ends up being extinguished by it.

The stronger, “higher types” are by no means immune to this threat, moreover. Just because they are more overflowing with life, they will undertake riskier and more demanding projects that will periodically leave them exhausted and highly vulnerable to the temptations of ascetic morality. Reginster cites a revealing passage from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* on this: “What do we combat in Christianity? That it wants to break the strong, that it wants to ... exploit their bad hours and their occasional weariness, ... that it knows how to poison and sicken the noble instincts until their strength, their will to power turns backward, against itself” (WP §252). The depression or depletion of energy to which morality constitutes an ultimately self-defeating response is a universal and enduring feature of the human condition; equally enduring, therefore, is the threat that morality poses.

Reginster identifies this threat as a peculiar form of dysfunctionality, which he calls *self-undermining functionality*: the functionality of morality undermines itself, because by exercising its normal function, which is to restore a feeling of power, it ends up

aggravating the very weakness and impotence it was supposed to remedy. What originally functions as “an artifice for the *preservation* of life” (GM III §13), offering the depressed and depleted an alternative to suicidal nihilism, discharges that function in a way that systematically decreases the “physiological capacity for life” (GM III §11). In this sense, morality’s functionality is self-undermining.

Nietzsche’s likely model here, Reginster illuminatingly observes, is Claude Bernard’s conception of pathology as the exaggeration of normal, life-serving functions. What is pathological in gastric ulcer is that the stomach, whose function it is to digest food by secreting gastric acid, secretes so much gastric acid that it ends up digesting itself, thereby undermining its own capacity to digest food. Analogously, ascetic morality is a peculiar expression of life-affirming, protective and healing instincts that ends up annihilating life.

This pragmatic approach leads Reginster to formulate a distinctive answer to the familiar question of the *normative grounds* of Nietzsche’s critique: on Reginster’s account, the force of Nietzsche’s critique does not rest on one’s acceptance of certain characteristically Christian moral beliefs; nor does it presuppose a prudential commitment to well-being, or particular meta-ethical views. It makes no contentious assumptions on any of these fronts. Instead, it is an *internal* critique, but not in the sense in which this is usually understood, as diagnosing a rational tension within a certain outlook; rather, the critique is internal to the evaluative standard provided by the identification of morality’s *function*.⁵ Morality ultimately fails to solve the problem which it is its function to solve, and even aggravates it. It thus signally fails to live up to

⁵ A similarly internal functional critique is envisaged by Robert Guay, who conceives of ethical ideals as “functional,” and proposes that “by examining the functional history of ideals, one can assess them” in terms of “their own internal standards,” which is to say “in terms of their effectiveness” within the “greater pursuit” that they themselves define (Guay 2006, 355–7).

its own functional *raison d'être*, which is to act as a “medicine” (GS §345)—which is itself a functional notion, especially on Bernard’s functionalist conception of pathology. So far from curing the weakness and impotence it is supposed to remedy, morality only “makes the sick sicker” (GM III §20).

Now, if it is morality’s function that provides the standard of critique, this evidently puts a lot of weight on the ascription of a certain function to morality. Who is to say what morality’s function is? The function ascription stage would seem to be the moment in which the rabbit is slipped into the hat—what you get out of an ostensibly “internal” critique, the worry runs, is simply what you put in at that earlier stage.

But Reginster’s account defends itself against that charge by relying on an *etiological* understanding of function:⁶ in order to determine morality’s function, we must look to its history, and determine which among its past effects are causally responsible for the retention and current prevalence of morality. The effects of morality which it is its *function* to bring about will then be its *selected effects*—more precisely, those effects that have a history of being selected *for* (if there is selection of organs that pump blood and make noise, there will be selection *of* both effects; but the effect that is selected *for* is the pumping of blood, not the making of noise, because this is the effect that feeds back into the proliferation of that type of organ).

One of the main attractions of such an etiological conception of function is that it turns the issue of the function of morality into an entirely objective matter. Its function could *in principle* simply be read off morality’s causal history, even though, *in practice*, we find ourselves severely epistemically constrained by our limited capacity to reconstruct that history at the required level of detail. The etiological conception also

⁶ Richardson (2004, 43) also applies this conception of function to Nietzsche’s notions of wills, drives and instincts.

raises thorny questions about the operative mechanisms and units of selection, but let us put these aside, as these do not bear specifically on Reginster's account.

What does bear specifically on his account is the question whether there really is room within an etiological conception of functions for *self-undermining* functionality. Is it not built into that very way of thinking about function that anything which has a function must also have a history of *success*, i.e. a history of successfully discharging that same function? At first pass, one might think that if some object X has some effect E which it becomes the function of X to bring about in virtue of E's being conducive to the retention and proliferation of X, then there is no logical room for X to *systematically fail* to bring about E, and thus fail to contribute to the retention of proliferation of X, without thereby also losing its function.

In Reginster's defence, one *could* make logical room for an etiological notion of self-undermining functionality by complicating the picture somewhat. One could draw on the concept of a *selection shadow*, i.e. the idea that later stages in an individual's life are not subject to as much evolutionary pressure as earlier ones and thus have less influence on proliferation. The concept of a selection shadow was introduced in biology by J.B.S. Haldane and Peter Medawar to help answer just the sort of question Nietzsche raises about the ascetic ideal (GM III §13), namely why natural selection would ever have given rise to something inimical to life: why has the deterioration of physiological functions that accompanies senescence not been more strongly selected against? Or why do even extremely harmful mutations seem to proliferate? One answer is that evolutionary pressure is strongest at the reproductive age, and senescence takes place in a selection shadow, where natural selection can barely "see" us. The same idea explains why even harmful mutations can proliferate as long as their deleteriousness only manifests itself later in life—especially if they offer some advantage earlier in life.

If combined with a type/token distinction among effects, this concept of a selection shadow might also be invoked to explain why initially functional *values* can proliferate despite deteriorating into dysfunctionality in the course of the individual's lifetime. Assuming that one could make plausible that the way ascetic morality reproduces creates some sort of selection shadow, its function could indeed be self-undermining *without* ceasing to be its function: as long as *earlier tokens* of some type of effect E within an individual's life are conducive to the retention and proliferation of X, E could remain the function of X even if these tokens of E undermined the production of *later* tokens of E within that same individual's life.

A difficulty remains for this type of account, however: in the case of genetically inherited traits, it is the fact that the evolutionary pressure is focused on the individual's reproductive age that casts a selection shadow; but in the case of cultural phenomena like values, it is not obvious that the mechanism by which values are reproduced is similar enough to the way genes must pass through the bottleneck of sexual reproduction to give the concept of a selection shadow much purchase. The aged priest can still be a powerful proselytizer of values.

Yet I do not think Reginster has to face this difficulty; for, on closer analysis, the functional dynamics he describes turn out not to be an example of self-undermining functionality after all. The effect which it is the function of morality to bring about, on his account, is distinct from the effect that morality systematically fails to produce, which means that the form of functionality at issue is not, strictly speaking, *self*-undermining. What gets undermined, rather, is something closely related, but distinct.

The point already emerges from Reginster's guiding example of the stomach. If we say that the stomach's function is *to digest food*, its over-secretion of gastric acid is an effect that undermines the stomach's capacity to digest food, but these will be two

distinct types of effects, not an instance of tokens of one type of effect undermining the production of tokens of the same type. If, on the other hand, we say that the stomach's function is *to secrete gastric acid*, then the over-secretion of gastric acid will not undermine the effect which it is the stomach's function to bring about—quite the opposite.

Similarly, the effect that it is the function of morality to bring about, on Reginster's reading, namely the restoration of a *feeling* of power, is distinct from what thereby gets undermined, namely "life" or the will to power that motivates the adoption of morality. Reginster alternates between subtly different characterizations of morality's function and what it undermines, but they all have in common that they seem to pick out distinct things. He writes, for example: "While the pursuit of holiness may restore a feeling of power in the 'weak and impotent,' it does so by *worsening* the very condition of 'weakness and impotence' that caused damage to his feeling of power and inspired that pursuit in the first place" (2021, 9). But increasing the *feeling* of power is not the same as worsening the *condition* of impotence—indeed, Reginster's formulation itself grants that the condition of impotence is what *causes* damage to the feeling of power, which presupposes that they are distinct. Similarly, a later passage observes that morality functions to satisfy the wish of "agents beset with impotent *ressentiment* ... to feel powerful again," but does so "at the cost of further weakening them—of further undermining their 'power'" (2021, 48). Again, feeling powerful and being powerful are not the same thing, even if morality's popularity depends on mistaking one for the other. And in the passage that first properly introduces the idea of self-undermining functionality, Reginster puts it thus: "while [the ascetic strain in Christian morality] is best explained as 'an artifice for the *preservation* of life' (GM III §13), it operates in the service of this aim in a manner that proves ruinous to health by necessarily causing a

decrease in the ‘physiological capacity for life’ (GM III §11)” (2021, 43). Yet again, the effect in virtue of which morality acts to preserve life is not identical with the physiological capacity for life. This suggests that the kind of functionality at issue here is not, strictly speaking, *self*-undermining, even though what gets undermined is connected to what does the undermining.

A more accurate description is the one Reginster lands on at the end of the book, when he characterizes the use of morality to restore the weak’s feeling of power as “self-defeating” (2021, 188): if morality in fact only further weakens the weak, their feeling of power will eventually come to reflect that fact, thereby defeating the purpose of adopting moral values in the first place. But this is a complex and temporally extended feedback loop between distinct causes and effects.

Looking beyond the question whether the etiological conception of function can or needs to accommodate the notion of self-undermining functionality, there is the more fundamental question whether reading Nietzsche as articulating an internal critique based on an etiological conception of function does justice to GM’s critical import. To be sure, such internal critiques based on etiological conceptions of functions seem attractively light on presuppositions. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere,⁷ they face an *authority problem*: why should we now—or why should Nietzsche’s target audience—care about these selected effects? Just because some of morality’s past effects contributed to its being around now does not necessarily mean that we want to see these same effects realized in the future. Maybe morality does not ultimately do a good job of solving the problem it exists to solve. But so what? Something more needs to be in play for this insight to carry normatively significant implications.

This means that although Reginster’s *presents* Nietzsche’s critique of morality as

⁷ See Queloz (2022).

internal to morality's etiological function, thereby apparently dodging the need to rely on more substantive and controversial evaluative commitments of a Nietzschean kind, that critique *cannot* remain internal if it is to have any normative bite; and much of Reginster's rhetoric in fact derives its intelligibility and force from the fact that the critique actually *does not* remain internal.

In the book's closing paragraph, for instance, Reginster observes: "The pragmatic critique of morality is thus an *internal* critique of a particular sort: morality poses a danger when it is put to a particular use, because this use is self-defeating" (2021, 188). But his reference to the "danger" posed by morality already belies the claim that the critique is internal. If morality fails to fulfil its function and actually proves harmful to one's capacity for life, or "ruinous to health" (2021, 43), as Reginster puts it, what makes it "dangerous" is not that it fails to fulfil its function, but that it is ruinous to health. And that effect only *counts as* "dangerous" in virtue of a substantive evaluative commitment to the value of health. So while painting Nietzsche's critique as operating entirely within and resting solely on etiologically identified functions gives it an air of impartiality, as if Nietzsche were looking at the machinery of morality like an astute but disinterested engineer who finds a machine to be defective according to its own functional logic, Reginster cannot ultimately get around the fact that the critique's normative authority has to come from substantive evaluative commitments—be it the ones that we readers bring to that critique, or the ones that Nietzsche persuades us to adopt.

Another concern, finally, is that Reginster's account makes out morality to be more universally dysfunctional than it in fact is. Some priestly types really do find their power durably increased by morality. History offers many examples of priestly types who ended up completely dominating the knightly types. There have been times when the medieval clergy bossed around the local aristocracy, when religious reformers toppled

monarchs, when cult leaders and gurus had hosts at their beck and call. They all undeniably succeeded in bending the world to their will. And of course the Papacy in its prime remains the main example; “just consider,” Nietzsche writes, “before whom one bows today in Rome itself as before the quintessence of all the highest values” (GM I §16)—it is no longer the emperors of yore.

What is more, some of these priestly types are not sickly and weak at all, but dangerously flourishing. That may be because they do not themselves practice the ascetic values they preach. But this does not alter the fact that they have done well out of them. Perhaps the function of ascetic morality for such priestly types of a “higher” sort is different from its function for the weak and impotent. Again, however, the etiological conception of function is *prima facie* inhospitable to this kind of perspectival nuance, focusing attention on the objective function of morality that explains why it exists instead of inviting us to explore the multiplicity of ways in which morality can become functional or dysfunctional for different people under different conditions. We may therefore prefer to apply to Nietzsche’s thought a conception of function that is more accommodating of the perspectivalness of functionality, and more directly connected to the evaluative commitments that imbue functional insights with normative authority.⁸

I should emphasize in closing that I do not take any of these points to detract from the underlying soundness of Reginster’s reading. These are in-house quibbles arising only once one is fully on board with the exegetical framework that this reading offers and so compellingly exemplifies. To my mind, Reginster’s signal achievement in this book is to have demonstrated how one can harness and combine the force of

⁸ I defend such a conception of function tailored to the interpretation of pragmatic genealogies in Queloz (2021, 221–7).

sentimentalist and pragmatic readings of GM. The power of the resulting approach promises to match the richness of Nietzsche's elusive classic.

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