



*On The Genealogy of Morals* is made up of three essays, all of which question and critique the value of our moral judgments based on a genealogical method whereby Nietzsche examines the origins and meanings of our different moral concepts.

The first essay, *"Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad'"* contrasts what Nietzsche calls "master morality" and "slave morality." Master morality was developed by the strong, healthy, and free, who saw their own happiness as good and named it thus. By contrast, they saw those who were weak, unhealthy, and enslaved as "bad," since their weakness was undesirable. By contrast, the slaves, feeling oppressed by these wealthy and happy masters, called the masters "evil," and called themselves "good" by contrast.

The second essay, *"Guilt, 'Bad Conscience,' and the like"* deals with (surprise, surprise) guilt, bad conscience, and the like. Nietzsche traces the origins of concepts such as guilt and punishment, showing that originally they were not based on any sense of moral transgression. Rather, guilt simply meant that a debt was owed and punishment was simply a form of securing repayment. Only with the rise of slave morality did these moral concepts gain their present meanings. Nietzsche identifies bad conscience as our tendency to see ourselves as sinners and locates its origins in the need that came with the development of society to inhibit our animal instincts for aggression and cruelty and to turn them inward upon ourselves.

The third essay, *"What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?"* confronts asceticism, the powerful and paradoxical force that dominates contemporary life. Nietzsche sees it as the expression of a weak, sick will. Unable to cope with its struggle against itself, the sick will sees its animal instincts, its earthly nature, as vile, sinful, and horrible. Unable to free itself from these instincts, it attempts to subdue and tame itself as much as possible. Nietzsche concludes that "man would rather will nothingness than not will."

Nietzsche is difficult to read because he demands that we overturn or suspend many of the assumptions that our very reasoning relies upon. He is one of the Western tradition's deepest thinkers precisely because he calls so much into question. If we can come to understand Nietzsche's genealogical method, his doctrine of the will to power, and his perspectivism as all linked, his arguments will become much easier to follow.

In Nietzsche's distinction between a thing and its meaning, we find the initial doubt with which Nietzsche unravels so many of our assumptions. We are generally tempted to see things as having inherent meanings. For instance, punishment is at once the act of punishing and the reason behind the punishment. However, Nietzsche argues, these things have had different meanings at different times. For instance, the act of punishment has been at times a celebration of one's power, at times an act of cruelty, at times a simple tit-for-tat. We cannot understand a thing, and we certainly cannot understand its origin, if we assume that it has always held the same meaning.

Central to Nietzsche's critique, then, is an attempt at genealogy that will show the winding and undirected route our different moral concepts have taken to arrive in their present shape. Morality is generally treated as sacred because we assume that there is some transcendental ground for our morals, be it God, reason, tradition, or something else. Yet contrary to our assumption that "good," "bad," or "evil" have always had the same meanings, Nietzsche's genealogical method shows how these terms have evolved, shattering any illusion as to the continuity or absolute truth of our present moral concepts.

Because they can have different, even contradictory, meanings over the course of their long life spans, Nietzsche does not believe that concepts or things are the fundamental stuff that makes up reality. Instead, he looks beneath these things to see what drives the different meanings that they adopt over time. Hiding beneath he finds force and will. All of existence, Nietzsche asserts, is a struggle between different wills for the feeling of power. This "will to power" is most evident on a human level, where we see people constantly competing with one another, often for no other purpose than to feel superior to those that they overcome.

That a thing has a meaning at all means that there is some will dominating it, bending it toward a certain interpretation. That a thing may have different meanings over time suggests that different wills have come to dominate it. For instance, the concept of "good" was once dominated by the will of healthy, strong barbarians, and had the opposite meaning that it does now that it is dominated by the will of weak, "sick" ascetics.

According to Nietzsche, then, a belief in an absolute truth or an absolute anything is to give in to one particular meaning, one particular interpretation of a thing. It is essentially to allow oneself to be dominated by a particular will. A will that wishes to remain free will shun absolutes of all kinds and try to look at a matter from as many different perspectives as possible in order to gain its own. This doctrine that has deeply influenced postmodern thought is called "perspectivism."

Nietzsche's inquiries are thus conducted in a very irreverent spirit. Nothing is sacred, nothing is absolute, nothing, we might even say, is true. Our morality is not a set of duties passed down from God but an arbitrary code that has evolved as randomly as the human species itself. The only constant is that we, and everything else, are constantly striving for more power, and the only constant virtue is a will that is powerful, and free from bad conscience, hatred, and resentment.

Nietzsche's main project in the Genealogy is to question the value of our morality. Ultimately, he argues that our present morality is born out of a resentment and hatred that was felt toward anything that was powerful, strong, or healthy. As such, he sees our present morality as harmful to the future health and prosperity of our species. While the "blonde beasts" and barbarians of primitive master morality are animalistic brutes, at least they are strong and healthy. On the other hand, our present ascetic morality has "deepened" us by turning our aggressive instincts inward and seeing ourselves as a new wilderness to struggle against. Nietzsche's ideal is to maintain this depth and yet not be ashamed of our animal instincts or of the life that glows within us.

In the priestly value system, God is defined as good and the opposite of evil. Evil is identified with the strong, the noble and the beautiful. Therefore, in slave morality the world becomes ugly and banal because the beautiful is evil. Nietzsche does not oppose kindness, humility and forgiveness per se. He does want us to understand that they are transformations of the impotence, submission and cowardice of the slave class.

Nietzsche believes that the conflict between "good and bad" vs "good and evil" reflects two value systems. The latter has been predominant in recent times.

The second essay is mostly a discussion of conscience, justice and punishment.

According to Nietzsche, humans are unique in that they can make promises. This presupposes a continuity of purpose that animals lack. In humans, that purpose is opposed by a tendency to forget. This is healthy. Memory loss prevents a lingering sense of failure and disappointment in humans. It makes it possible to be hopeful about the future.

Conscience is an instinct to carry out responsibilities. Societies have invented means to instill the habit of keeping promises. But Nietzsche insists that a bad conscience is not a fear of punishment. In fact, originally punishment had no connection with what we now call conscience. Rather, punishment originated as a form of repaying a debt. The debtor would repay his creditor by suffering. The creditor was repaid in the form of the pleasure that comes from enjoying the suffering of another. This pleasure is connected to the human experience of power. (Are you rolling

your eyes at this? At least a little?)

Nietzsche goes on at length about punishment and suffering. Among other conclusions he draws, he offers the theory that God was invented to make human suffering meaningful. Relatedly, he wonders if free will was invented to make the world more interesting to God.

Nietzsche then returns to the subject of justice and offers a definition that justice is payment by a transgressor of what he owes to the community. Nietzsche thinks that societies move through stages of justice, including a stage where a legal system will be devised to impose justice. Such a system will include elements of mercy, a luxury of the strong.

Nietzsche concludes the second essay by acknowledging that he has been harsh in his criticisms of Christianity. But he feels that the "disease" of "bad conscience" warrants a harsh response. Christianity has associated guilt with feelings that are fundamental and unavoidable as a part of our nature. This creates a desire for otherworldliness or purity that Nietzsche considers nihilistic. He argues that humanity requires an upheaval of values so that moral condemnation no longer attaches to things that are a natural part of earthly human life. He sees Zarathustra, of his earlier writings, as the embodiment of the upheaval that humanity needs.

The third essay addresses asceticism. Nietzsche discusses the attraction asceticism holds for women, the psychologically ill and priests, among others. Women find it enhances their charms, says Nietzsche. (He must have been a fun date.) Psychotic people find asceticism attractive because they wish to withdraw from the world. Priests are drawn to it because it gives them power. These differences suggest a shared fear of nothingness and a corresponding urge to find meaning, Nietzsche believes. (And folks, isn't that a weird inference to draw? Or is it just me?)

Nietzsche then considers the case of Richard Wagner and his opera Parsifal, which praises chastity. Why would Wagner, a master of sensuality, praise asceticism? He may have felt a need to embrace and associate with respectability. To this end, Wagner accepted Schopenhauer and his special metaphysical category of music—as an expression of the basic nature of the universe.

Nietzsche then offers a discussion of Schopenhauer's personal psychology and his need for enemies. (Sort of like a guy elaborating on an old girlfriend, "she could never get along . . .")

Nietzsche thinks that philosophers generally like asceticism for the independence it brings. Poverty, humility and chastity free one from desire. At one time, irrationality, cruelty and violent emotions were considered virtues. But now the opposite is true, resulting in the ascetic ideal becoming associated with priests, something Nietzsche seems mildly unhappy about. The essay then discusses how asceticism is both a symptom and a cure of poor psychological health. Little of this discussion seems plausible.

Finally, Nietzsche concludes the third essay with the observation that asceticism is a "will to nothingness" and 'nothingness' is a purpose for humans to cling to. The alternative is to live with no purpose at all and that provides no meaning to one's will. Humans would rather have nothingness for a purpose than have no purpose at all.

So, wow. That's a lot of stuff to wrap your head around. But for me, it was filled with unsubstantiated and unlikely speculation. Much of his speculation could have been checked via old-fashioned scholarship, but Nietzsche makes no effort to do that. For example, Nietzsche claims punishment started as way of repaying debts? Really? Or women gravitate to asceticism because it makes them seem more attractive? Where is the support for this? And so forth. I just don't get it. For me, he lacks credibility. Often, his argument amounts to nothing more than "because I say so". Plus, he is stubbornly cryptic for my tastes. Are these points of his meant to be accurate descriptions of reality? Or are they thought experiments meant to challenge us without necessarily resembling the real world?

Unraveling Nietzsche is exhausting.

It is possible, of course, that I am not reading Nietzsche in the right way. It might be that I am holding him to a standard that should not be applied to him. For example, when Plato or Aristotle or Augustine offer strange theories or recite tall tales, I ignore it and look for the larger meaning. Perhaps, that is how to read Nietzsche too. His prose displays no sense of accountability for the accuracy of details - historical or otherwise. So maybe I should not expect accuracy in the details with Nietzsche. Perhaps, I should focus on the big picture.

If I were to do that, I might conclude that Nietzsche does not like the bourgeois spirit of Europe in the latter half of the 19th Century. He does not like the mediocrity and egalitarianism of the rising middle class. He does not like the comfortable and smug thing that Christianity had become. He longs for greater creativity, beauty and freedom. He thinks that the creators of beauty should be treated as special and that they should be encouraged to think courageously, to act vigorously and to take risks. The creators of beauty should be free to pursue their vision and not be held back by the passive, careful and mundane attitudes that are the hallmark of the middle class. Nietzsche may be saying that provocative projects in art, literature and even morality should be valued by the rest of us, even when they challenge or frighten us.

A friend reminded me the other day of a handy formulation to remind us of where Nietzsche fits in to the history of western philosophy: Socrates wanted to know nature, Descartes wanted to control nature, Nietzsche wanted to liberate nature and the post-moderns want to cancel nature. In the GENEALOGY, Nietzsche argues for restoring to ethics a natural order that has been lost. He wants to return to an ethic that encourages and rewards human characteristics that he regards as more natural than the priestly values. These include strength, vigor, power and the like. This is at the heart of his rejection of slave morality.

Most of us can accept Nietzsche's thesis that ethics should conform to nature. But the abiding question after reading his GENEALOGY is whether Nietzsche has accurately characterized human nature. At best, his characterization seems incomplete.

Be that as it may, it is Nietzsche's desire to craft an ethics that frees human nature that distinguishes him from the moderns, who want ethics to control nature. And that is Nietzsche's greatest contribution to western thought. Even if we are not persuaded by Nietzsche, we cannot deny that he changed the conversation and is rightly regarded as the end of the modern and/or the beginning of the post-modern period.

Murderous comments on what Nietzsche calls the herd mentality and slave morals. Again, he emphasizes the self-determination of values, the creation of one's own truths and objectives to look up to. However, the conditions to be part of which Nietzsche calls an aristocratic race is too vague and its definition of the lower part of mankind in his binary worldview is too much relying on attacks about physical disability to convince me. In short, this specific point can serve as an overall appreciation of the qualities and flaws of the work: much gusto, virtuoso command over the evocative powers of language and consistent emphasis on the individual setting his own values for himself, however here and there the work betrays a flippant lack of accuracy and care for rigorous demonstration.

... More particularly, the gullibility of the general public looking for meaning, purpose, answers as to the reason for their personal suffering (which is mainly due to physiological causes according to Nietzsche):

***'He protects, in sooth, his sick herd well enough, does this strange herdsman; he protects them also against themselves, against the sparks (even in the centre of the herd) of wickedness, knavery, malice, and all the other ills that the plaguey and the sick are heir to; he fights with cunning, hardness, and stealth against anarchy and against the ever imminent break-up inside the herd, where resentment, that most dangerous blasting-stuff and explosive, ever accumulates and accumulates. Getting rid of this blasting-stuff in such a way that it does not blow up the herd and the herdsman, that is his real feat, his supreme utility; if you wish to comprise in the shortest formula the value of the priestly life, it would be correct to say the priest is the diverter of the course of resentment.'***

[I have a nagging feeling that this may not necessarily apply to religious cult leaders exclusively... As the two disapproving mentions to Eugen Dühring's facile and pseudo-scientific anti-semitism seem to confirm. Matter of fact, it recalls immediately [book:Propaganda|493212] regarding the different sorts of associations in which citizens of the USA were taking part in the late 1920s and [Psychologie Des Foules](#), dedicated to the categorization of the main sorts of psychological specificities in crowds.]

- Also, on this same topic:

***'Such a hypnotic deadening of sensibility and susceptibility to pain, which presupposes somewhat rare powers, especially courage, contempt of opinion, intellectual stoicism, is less frequent than another and certainly easier training which is tried against states of depression. I mean mechanical activity. It is indisputable that a suffering existence can be thereby considerably alleviated. This fact is called to-day by the somewhat ignoble title of the***

*"Blessing of work." The alleviation consists in the attention of the sufferer being absolutely diverted from suffering, in the incessant monopoly of the consciousness by action, so that consequently there is little room left for suffering—for narrow is it, this chamber of human consciousness! Mechanical activity and its corollaries, such as absolute regularity, punctilious unreasoning obedience, the chronic routine of life, the complete occupation of time, a certain liberty to be impersonal, nay, a training in "impersonality," self-forgetfulness, "incuria sui"—with what thoroughness and expert subtlety have all these methods been exploited by the ascetic priest in his war with pain!*

*When he has to tackle sufferers of the lower orders, slaves, or prisoners (or women, who for the most part are a compound of labour-slave and prisoner), all he has to do is to juggle a little with the names, and to rechristen, so as to make them see henceforth a benefit, a comparative happiness, in objects which they hated—the slave's discontent with his lot was at any rate not invented by the priests. An even more popular means of fighting depression is the ordaining of a little joy, which is easily accessible and can be made into a rule; this medication is frequently used in conjunction with the former ones. The most frequent form in which joy is prescribed as a cure is the joy in producing joy (such as doing good, giving presents, alleviating, helping, exhorting, comforting, praising, treating with distinction); together with the prescription of "love your neighbour." The ascetic priest prescribes, though in the most cautious doses, what is practically a stimulation of the strongest and most life-assertive impulse—the Will for Power. The happiness involved in the "smallest superiority" which is the concomitant of all benefiting, helping, extolling, making one's self useful, is the most ample consolation, of which, if they are well-advised, physiological distortions avail themselves: in other cases they hurt each other, and naturally in obedience to the same radical instinct. An investigation of the origin of Christianity in the Roman world shows that co-operative unions for poverty, sickness, and burial sprang up in the lowest stratum of contemporary society, amid which the chief antidote against depression, the little joy experienced in mutual benefits, was deliberately fostered. Perchance this was then a novelty, a real discovery? This conjuring up of the will for cooperation, for family organisation, for communal life, for "Caenacula," necessarily brought the Will for Power, which had been already infinitesimally stimulated, to a new and much fuller manifestation.*

*The herd organisation is a genuine advance and triumph in the fight with depression. With the growth of the community there matures even to individuals a new interest, which often enough takes him out of the more personal element in his discontent, his aversion to himself, the "despectus sui" of Geulincx. All sick and diseased people strive instinctively after a herd-organisation, out of a desire to shake off their sense of oppressive discomfort and weakness [that is, to comfort and be comforted?]; the ascetic priest divines this instinct and promotes it; wherever a herd exists it is the instinct of weakness which has wished for the herd, and the cleverness of the priests which has organised it, for, mark this: by an equally natural necessity the strong strive as much for isolation as the weak for union: when the former bind themselves it is only with a view to an aggressive joint action and joint satisfaction of their Will for Power, much against the wishes of their individual consciences; the latter, on the contrary, range themselves together with positive delight in such a muster—their instincts are as much gratified thereby as the instincts of the "born master" (that is, the solitary beast-of-prey species of man) are disturbed and wounded to the quick by organisation. There is always lurking beneath every oligarchy—such is the universal lesson of history—the desire for tyranny. Every oligarchy is continually quivering with the tension of the effort required by each individual to keep mastering this desire. (Such, e.g., was the Greek; Plato shows it in a hundred places, Plato, who knew his contemporaries—and himself.)'*

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- A 'diatribe'\*\*\* against a certain conception of science, presuming to have a say outside its domain of expertise to criticize and demand...

Albeit from a different sensibility, it also calls to mind (at least to mine) Mikhail Bakunin's words of warning against a scientific administration of society in [Dieu et l'Etat](#) / [God and the State](#):

*'The ascetic ideal has an aim—this goal is, putting it generally, that all the other interests of human life should, measured by its standard, appear petty and narrow; it explains epochs, nations, men, in reference to this one end; it forbids any other interpretation, any other end; it repudiates, denies, affirms, confirms, only in the sense of its own interpretation (and there ever a more thoroughly elaborated system of interpretation?); it subjects itself to no power, rather does it believe in its own precedence over every power—it believes that nothing powerful exists in the world that has not first got to receive from "it" a meaning, a right to exist, a value, as being an instrument*

*in its work, a way and means to its end, to one end. Where is the counterpart of this complete system of will, end, and interpretation? Why is the counterpart lacking? Where is the other \"one aim\"? But I am told it is not lacking, that not only has it fought a long and fortunate fight with that ideal, but that further it has already won the mastery over that ideal in all essentials: let our whole modern science attest this—that modern science, which, like the genuine reality-philosophy which it is, manifestly believes in itself alone, manifestly has the courage to be itself, the will to be itself, and has got on well enough without God, another world, and negative virtues.'*

*'Science itself now needs a justification (which is not for a minute to say that there is such a justification). Turn in this context to the most ancient and the most modern philosophers: they all fail to realise the extent of the need of a justification on the part of the Will for Truth—here is a gap in every philosophy—what is it caused by? Because up to the present the ascetic ideal dominated all philosophy, because Truth was fixed as Being, as God, as the Supreme Court of Appeal, because Truth was not allowed to be a problem. Do you understand this \"allowed\"? From the minute that the belief in the God of the ascetic ideal is repudiated, there exists a new problem: the problem of the value of truth. The Will for Truth needed a critique—let us define by these words our own task—the value of truth is tentatively to be called in question. . . . (If this seems too laconically expressed, I recommend the reader to peruse again that passage from the Joyful Wisdom which bears the title, \"How far we also are still pious,\" Aph. 344, and best of all the whole fifth book of that work, as well as the Preface to The Dawn of Day.'*

Nietzsche was not one for exposition or systematic investigation. He writes in impassioned bursts rather than extended thoughts—a style in keeping with his abhorrence for all things stale, academic, and 'English'. This quality is evident right from the preface, which is divided into several shorter prefaces. These frequent breaks are maintained throughout the book, each essay being divided into chunks too short for subchapters, but too long for aphorisms.

On one level, this is a mere trifle of formatting. But on another (as I alluded to above), these frequent bursts hint at Nietzsche's thought as a whole. Nietzsche, in his characteristic way, flipped the traditional Western preoccupation for truth on its head—explaining it as a weakness rather than a strength. To be sure, this is a fascinating idea. But this also helps to explain why Nietzsche wrote the way he did.

Instead of a scholarly treatment, which would be a manifestation of the traditional 'will to truth' which he so detested, Nietzsche's mind skips along the inquiry like a flat rock on the surface of a pond. He dips in quickly, just enough to get his fingertips wet, and then recoils. To pick another analogy, he is somewhat like a fencer: he searches for a problem's weakest point, makes a stab at it, and then draws back.

This style works well for some subjects, and poorly for others. In *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche is tackling a genuinely academic problem (which is probably why academics tend to think this book is his masterpiece): the origins of morality. This brings Nietzsche dangerously close to dreaded methodical argument—an awkwardness he tries to counteract by maintaining his gnomic and forceful style. But if Nietzsche is not trying to get at the \"truth\" of the origins of Western morality, if he does not think that knowing the historical origins of good and evil is better than being ignorant of them, what is he doing?

For me, these are serious contradictions, and Nietzsche was probably aware of them. As a result, this book is suggestive, not conclusive. The fun comes more from reading Nietzsche's prose than from any revelations about the nature of morality. But there are some solid insights, nonetheless. Nietzsche connects Christian meekness with the low status of the people who originated it. And isn't that exactly the kind of idea you would expect from a powerless people—to turn the other cheek? Nietzsche points out that Christian morality effectively turns weakness into strength—the perfect moral system for a religion of the lower-classes.

But is this the true root of Christian morality? I have no idea. Such a question seems impossible to answer with any degree of certainty. For this, and all of the other arguments in this book, you'll just have to take Nietzsche at his word.

It is entertaining because Nietzsche is an outrageously brilliant writer who expresses his complex philosophical ideas in a creative way, and who makes even the most cynical ideas sound beautiful. Nietzsche is truly blessed for having the analytical brain of a philosopher as well as masterful skill in sculpting beautiful phrases, like a poet.

It is disturbing because of Nietzsche's tremendous cynicism, which can often make one uncomfortable depending on how attached you are to a certain belief. There is no way around it: this book will probably offend you. If you are a Christian, it will offend you. If you are a leftist of any kind whatsoever it will offend you. If you are an atheist, someone who believes in the power of science, or an agnostic, it will offend you. If you believe in eastern philosophies, it will offend you. That is the real beauty of Nietzsche: he challenges your beliefs and offers a compelling alternative. The Genealogy of Morals is more full of Nietzsche's criticisms of ideas than his attempts to supplant them, though.

I cannot stress how well-written this book is. Nietzsche's words will annihilate your beliefs at the same time that they caress your mind.

It isn't quite up to par as Nietzsche's masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is one of my favourite books. But it is still excellent. The only major flaw in this otherwise near-perfect book is that I find his argument is really scattered. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was scattered as well, but it didn't hurt that work because Nietzsche was deliberately trying to be esoteric and hard to understand and that worked really well, since *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is written as a kind of satire of religious scripture. But *Genealogy of Morals* is his most structured work, and it doesn't seem that Nietzsche is trying to be overly hard to understand here, so I can't forgive him on that one.

The man of resentment, N says, has a soul that "*looks obliquely*," that loves hiddenness and secrets. You can't tell me N doesn't prefer this to the noble conquerors, since it describes his own method. The supposed object of his polemical attack keeps sounding like Hamlet! The ambivalence of this book is what moves me. "*A Polemic*," it's subtitled, but his genealogical method--later systematized and institutionally accredited by [Michel Foucault](#) and his disciples--in which each concept is explained as a function of its use at different times by individual actors for distinct purposes--allows him to rove among various historical types (the priest, the artist, the philosopher, the scientist) and explore their relation to the ascetic ideals, the will to nothingness, that he sees as the basis of morality. N's historical and psychological sense gives this book a strange resemblance to a novel, a modernist novel where the organizing consciousness drifts this way and that across a social landscape, alighting in this mind and that; I am reminded oddly of [Mrs. Dalloway](#). The novelistic--dialogic--quality of N's *writing* calls N's propositions into question as propositions, which is why I don't think the book's trespasses against our contemporary morality have to be taken as absolutes, as absolutely disqualifying. N allows in the text that the text will be criticized: he calls implicitly for the active reader.

N endorses *interpretation*, rumination, which he defines as the unavoidable *falsification* of "reality" in the service of creating values. He claims that ascetic ideals arise from a belief in truth as opposed to interpretation. Therefore, the against-the-grain reading I present here--i.e., that this book is a novel; that its heroes in fact are the priests, Jews, Christians, and metaphysicians who turned against the merely given to create values in the name of the ideal--is in the text's own spirit, as is my relative indifference to N's more dated claims (the anti-Christian ranting, important in its own period but now banal, even philistine; the sexism, in which N betrays no historic sense whatever of gender roles as value-creations and constructs; the insistence on a physiological basis for all intellectual dispositions, in which he uses a worrying healthy/sick language that I suspect he'd think twice about in our era of "biopolitics," if I'm using that shibboleth correctly).

The end of the third treatise, in which N explains his problem with atheists, Darwinists, empiricists, and utilitarians--they who purified the ascetic ideal of faith in the supernatural, boiling it down to the no-less erroneous faith in truth--is of special relevance to today, as we are awash in dunderheaded "materialism" and scientism. I won't belabor N's famous analysis of resentment; I think its relevance to all disputants in at least American politics today should go without saying.

On the *Genealogy of Morals*, consists of three interrelated essays discussing his understanding of the origins of human morality and offering a critique of their development. He writes the book in the year 1887 within the context of a newly unified Germany, which, despite prevailing national optimism, Nietzsche characterizes as "nihilistic" — that is, lacking moral principles. In the first essay, "*Good and Evil*," "*Good and Bad*," he asserts that the current concept of morals was ultimately caused by a resentment that is no longer warranted — a resentment that leads people to believe that what is not egotistic is morally good. Nietzsche suggests otherwise, arguing that moral actions are really those that promote one's will to power. His argument correctly asserts that humanity's moral code assumes that what is good is good in-and-of itself; however, he falls victim to assumption himself by believing that what provides power is purely egotistical in nature, and further, that power is the even ideal.

In the beginning of the first essay, Nietzsche condemns English psychology for assuming that there exists a universal notion of "good" and "evil," and claims that those who practice it lack historical spirit. This prevailing assumption, he says, has developed out of human habit, which misunderstands what is "good" to be good in and of itself. He writes:

"Now it is plain to me, first of all, that in this theory the source of the concept 'good' has been sought and established in the wrong place: the judgement 'good' did not originate with those to whom 'goodness' was shown! Rather, it was 'the good' themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradiction to all the low, low-minded, common plebian."

This argument could be valid, because in it Nietzsche asserts the truth that morality is primarily based in assumption. That is, the assumption that what is "good" is good inherently, when the irony is that no living person lives to tell the ultimate consequences of human actions. Nietzsche would say this finite state that humanity searches for doesn't exist, i.e. there is not afterlife or final judgement and religions are an attempt to find meaning in a meaningless world. He suggests that to overcome this nihilistic perspective one must seek his/her will to power.

Building off this, Nietzsche explains where the common understanding of what is "good" and what is "bad" originated. He says that history has proven the existence of two types of values, which he distinguishes as "master" vs. "slave" morality. Master morality is active and bases what is good in consequence, i.e. what promotes power and growth is good, while slave morality is reactive and is based in "ressentiment" — a negative response to the forces that oppose it. An example of this in the present day could be, in a general sense, capitalism (noble morality) versus socialism (slave morality). He writes: "The slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the resentment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge." According to Nietzsche, a noble man's "good" is precisely what a man of resentment considers "evil." This is unreasonable, he argues, because you cannot separate a person (or animal, in his example) from his/her essence, though grammar has shaped the mind to separate a subject (actor) from its predicate (deed). He opposes such resentment, saying that to criticize one for being "strong" is to blame them for existing.

Again, this is a fair argument. Not only does Nietzsche assert that truth that all morality is based in assumption, but he points out that therefore what is considered "good" — that is, what is characterized by humility, patience and perseverance through suffering — might not actually be ideal. As he points out, history has proven that oppression causes revolt and consequently, the direct opposition towards the interests of the oppressors. Ultimately, Nietzsche argues that people need to exercise their power — whatever that is. Therefore, what is good and what is bad can be distinguished by what is active and what is reactive — not what is or isn't egotistic.

Nietzsche believes that while the gap between "the noble" and "the slave" needed to be closed, society has unnecessarily maintained a slave morality based in fear. He says humanity must overcome this mentality and start asserting its power to act by acting courageous, confident and determined. This overcomes nihilism without relying on the man-made hope of religion, which again, he views as an escape from reality. Indeed, ideally it also overcomes resentment, however it is unrealistic to think that one can always replace the emotional effects of oppression with self-perseverance. That of course also brings up fact that oppression will always exist, even on a minor level, for example, a friend who's late to lunch will negatively impact the schedule of the other person, decreasing his/her power to act.

Further, herein lies the issue with Nietzsche's argument. Hypocritically, he false victim to the assumption that there is an attainable "ideal" upon which humanity should base its moral code. What good in the end is courage, confident and determination? Because everyone's personal interests will inevitably conflict, therefore seeking those things will never result in a universal good. Additionally, what might empower someone else might also empower the individual, so the concepts of slave and noble morality are not black and white — but blurred. One could argue that the exercise of power and humility can both act in one's interest and the interest of society, however that is not the root of the issue. The real question is a matter of the grounds for criticism, the grounds for characterizing "ideals." Ironically Nietzsche asserts that these cannot be evaluated — but that's another book for another time. The intuitions that make up the foundation of Nietzsche's theses in *On The Genealogy of Morals* are intuitions I do not at all find, well, intuitive. Fair enough. But doesn't the burden of proof lie on the philosopher to convert or persuade her reader of her position if the premises she take for granted aren't universally intuitive (which the philosopher should conservatively assume is often)? That's sort of the point of philosophy. And herein lies my problem with this work: Nietzsche has tasked himself with a *significant* philosophical, historical and philological



undertaking, and yet, he does little in the way of *proving* his thesis. Instead—and to be fair to Nietzsche, the work *is* subtitled, "a polemic"; reader be warned—he just rambles, seemingly off the cuff, about how he's right about what he's right about.

With that being said, this work isn't totally spoiled by Nietzsche's lacking methodology. The profundity of his not unusual boastfulness is matched by occasionally profound sentiments/observations.

Again, I happily concede that my two-star rating is not exempt from my personal biases (and undoubtedly that is the function of a rating system: to display the consumer's feelings, reactions, etc.). I value Nietzsche's contributions to academia and look forward to engaging with another one of his works. This one, however, is not for me.

Oh, and by the way, my review is wrong. Take it from Nietzsche: "If anyone finds what is written here obscure or unintelligible, I do not think that the blame should lie upon me." (p. 10, *On the Genealogy of Morals*)

*Section 13: To give at least an idea of how uncertain, how supplemental, how accidental the "meaning" of punishment is, and how one and the same procedure can be employed, interpreted, adapted to ends that differ fundamentally, I set down here the pattern that has emerged from consideration of relatively few chance instances I have noted. Punishment as a means of rendering harmless, of preventing further harm. Punishment as recompense to the injured party for the harm done, rendered in any form (even in that of a compensating affect). Punishment as the isolation of a disturbance of equilibrium, so as to guard against any further spread of the disturbance. Punishment as a means of inspiring fear of those who determine and execute the punishment. Punishment as a kind of repayment for the advantages the criminal has enjoyed hitherto (for example when he is employed as a slave in the mines). Punishment as the expulsion of a degenerate element (in some cases of an entire branch, as in Chinese law: thus as a means of preserving the purity of a race or maintaining a social type.) Punishment as a festival, namely as the rape and mockery of a finally defeated enemy. Punishment as the making of a memory, whether for him who suffers the punishment = so called "improvement" - or for those who witness its execution. Punishment as payment of a fee stipulated by the power that protects the wrongdoer from the excesses of revenge. Punishment as a compromise with revenge in its natural state when the latter is still maintained and claimed as a privilege by powerful clans. Punishment as a declaration of war and a war measure against an enemy of peace, of the law, of order, of the authorities, whom, as a danger to the community, as one who has broken the contract that defines the conditions under which it exists, as a rebel, a traitor, and breaker of the peace, one opposes with the means of war.*

According to Nietzsche, no one before him attempted to truly describe and explain how morality arose. Philosophers and scientists alike all tried to offer prescriptive morality, disguised in abstract and analytic language. A description of morals, a comparison between different morals in different ages and cultures, and an explanation of a moral value system, require the tools of philology and anthropology. In other words: to understand morals, one has to understand the environment in which these morals functioned.

So Nietzsche, steeped as he was in knowledge of Ancient Greece, sets out to analyse how the morals of Antiquity functioned. The fundamental premise that one has to agree with Nietzsche on, in order to follow his arguments, is that morality is a manifestation of our inbred instinct to divide the world into dichotomies: good and bad, true and false. From this it follows that in all cultures, different groups of people cling to different moral systems. In Ancient Greece, the elites divided the world into 'Gut' and 'Böse' – one translates this best as noble and vulgar. For the Greek aristocrat, he and his fellows were the only valuable social elements; they determined what happened within society, they acted how they wanted towards their minors (the people; the slaves), they only recognized as human their fellow aristocrats. The common rabble was simply uninteresting, vulgar, not worth any attention (in neither a positive nor negative way).

But times changed, and democracy as a social structure conquered the aristocracy. Now more people had to be acknowledged as factors of importance. Also, with the new artists (Aeschylus and Euripides) and new philosophers (Socrates, but even more so Plato), the intellectual climate changed. More and more emphasis was put onto scepticism – moral, religious and philosophical. This created a fertile soil for a value systems that emphasizes the suffering of the people, the inequality and injustices inherent in an aristocratic society.

The master morality (dividing the world into noble and vulgar) is now in danger. The slaves revolt. They invent a new moral system in which the first will be last and the last will be first – the masters in this world will be punished in the afterlife and those suffering right now will be rewarded when they die. This new moral system emphasizes human suffering, it seeks to give meaning to suffering and to human existence in general, and it accomplishes this by inventing another world, a better world, a world without suffering, a world in which the bad people will be

punished – some of them eternally.

Through the lens of this new moral system, the slaves view themselves as ‘Gut’, in the sense of suffering at the hands of their oppressors; and their oppressors as ‘Böse’, in the sense of evil, inhumane, unsympathetic. This is what Nietzsche calls ‘Sklavenmoral’, slave morality, which through priests is spread over society, in the end even subjugating the elites. Even the people who in former times of ‘Herrenmoral’ (master morality) were free and acting spirits, now internalize their own badness. Priests are sick people who breed an obedient herd animal, that knows only two instincts: fear and guilt. These concepts instil in man a conscience.

These concepts – guilt, shame, conscience, and the like – are dealt with in the second essay. In this essay, Nietzsche explains how in primitive times all man knew was barter and trade. These economic relationships between people emphasized credit and debt between people. Someone owned someone else something, and it was important that this something was remembered. The problem is, man has a natural tendency to forget, if not on purpose at least unconscious.

So, what happened? To enable communal peace and (hence) survival, those owing were threatened and punished if necessary, all in order to instil in primitive man a fear of punishment, to cultivate the unnatural concept of ‘Schuld’ (guilt and debt). For Nietzsche, then, morality originates out of custom, cultivated through fear and punishment by the elites.

According to Nietzsche, the stronger a community becomes and the more wealthy an elite becomes, the more insignificant becomes punishment. In the end, all guilt can be calculated, redeemed, forgiven. The logical endpoint of this development is the concept of ‘Grace’, in which the guilty are forgiven and are restored to full status. This marks the point of self-destruction of the concept ‘Guilt’ – it has now become void, meaningless.

But where does ‘conscience’, especially bad conscience, fit in? Well, Nietzsche tell us, punishment might tame man, make him docile and prudent, but it doesn’t eradicate the primary instincts. The thief will be prudent in not stealing when he knows he will be punished severely, but the fear of punishment doesn’t eradicate his thieving impulses. As soon as he sees the chance or as soon as punishment relaxes, he will revert to his original ways.

Nietzsche has a very interesting theory to account for bad conscience in man. A successful society (i.e. a society in which a bad conscience is needed) looks for its success here and now in its forefathers. Now the concepts ‘Schuld’ (debt) and ‘Pflicht’ (duty) are applied to societal ancestors – those who laid the foundations of this successful society. Man starts to feel obligated to honour and sacrifice to his ancestors. Aristocratic qualities (nobility, strength, power, etc.) are projected into the past, each family bidding against other families in the perfection of their ancestors. This process of ‘aristocratizing’ the past has a logical endpoint: long gone ancestors take the shape of gods. See, for example, the Roman families who claimed they were descendants of primal gods. By cultivating a sense of reverence for and sacrificing to ancestor gods, a common conscience is shaped. All community members internalize their debt to their common ancestor gods, man’s instincts are turned against himself and society is pacified. Continuous pangs of guilt and shame haunt man, man fares war on himself (see here Nietzsche’s influence on Freud).

Christianity has been most successful in subjugating the instincts of man and breeding a diseased herd animal along the way. In Christianity guilt and shame are cultivated through and through; man is inherently sinful. So sinful is man, that his guilt, his debt to his Creator, is irredeemable. Out of sympathy, out of pity, God incarnated and offered himself to redeem the irredeemable animal. For Nietzsche, Christianity cultivates fear, punishment, guilt and shame – eternal damnation and burning in Hell, settling the scores of this life in the afterlife, watching bad people burn for eternity (one wonders if there’s any popcorn in Heaven) – even the symbol of Christianity is an instrument of torture.

Nietzsche ends this second, very intriguing essay with a warning. The time of the herd mentality is over. The people might not know it yet, but true philosophers who ponder this situation will come to the conclusion that times are changing. Christianity is self-destructing: its absurd emphasis on goodness leads to a quest for truth which, through science, has effectively killed God. The next two centuries will be the battleground between the remnants of the old herd mentality and the new, affirmative perspective on life – beyond good and evil, beyond morality. In these new times, man will have to overcome the existential pessimism of life, the inherent nihilism of human being, by simply acting on his Will. If one simply does, without reflecting, without caring for other people, without any limitations, one simply is.

It is time for a species of better man – Übermensch, to use the controversial word – a man of the future who takes

back his freedom from the priests and the philosophers: \"This Antichrist and Anti-nihilist, this conqueror of God and of Nothingness – he must one day come\" (p.66)

The third and final essay, and the longest, strangely contains the least interesting portion of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. In this essay Nietzsche sets out to explore and explain the meaning of asceticism. According to him, the ascetic ideal can be viewed from the perspectives of different type of people. From the artist's perspective, asceticism means nothing at all – the artist, in order to create, draws on the philosopher's ideals (he mentions the influence Schopenhauer had on Wagner as a case in point). For the philosopher, asceticism is necessary: he can only philosophize when he is not hindered by the society around him. He has to be a recluse, focus his mind on important matters, so abstinence and continence are required. But, ultimately, for the philosopher, asceticism is simply a tool to philosophize successfully, it doesn't have much meaning in and of itself.

But it is primarily with the priest that asceticism has meaning: the priest, almost always a sick and weak animal himself, needs asceticism in order to guide the herd. As he claims: \"the lordship over sufferers is his kingdom.\" For the priest, asceticism means suffering on purpose, imitating Christ and hoping to come near Him. Subjugating your instincts means giving up the need for company (solitude), giving up the need for property and riches (humility, poverty), and not giving into your sexual impulses (chastity). While for the philosophers these are tools for thinking, the priest gives them metaphysical meaning: it is 'Good' to act thus.

Nietzsche doesn't draw this conclusion himself, but one wonders if the priests in the Nietzschean sense is much different from the politician, who creates a problem through his decisions and then happily offers you a solution, strengthening his own power in the process. The priest labels natural man's instincts (to possess, to conquer, to have sex) as 'Bad'; he makes man internalize this morality; and then, when man starts to suffer because of the war he wages on himself, offers his suffering herd a solution: it is the suffering which gives life meaning. If you live as a 'Good' man, your suffering will end in the afterlife – you will be rewarded.

Nietzsche has the guts to ask why the priest creates suffering in the first place. Why not rather promote a morality in which natural man can act on his instincts? Why subjugate natural man on purpose, causing suffering? Because the priest is a parasite; he needs the suffering masses in order to give meaning to his own existence. Nietzsche fulminates against priests as if they are the worst species of nature, the scum of the Earth. But, in a sense, he is right: the priest is himself a sick and weak individual, who draws strength and meaning from the suffering in life. As long as his herd suffers, he is well.

As always with Nietzsche, it is very hard to distinguish where he explains and where he preaches. The distinction between factual statements and moral expressions is almost non-existent in Nietzsche, which can make his thoughts sometimes hard to follow. For example, his hate against priests for instilling suffering in mankind seems to be incompatible with his own vision of the future, in which a select group of strong men will form a new species of man, a better species, subjugating the masses and exploit them for the cause of this new species (see especially Book 4 of *Wille Zur Macht*, in which Nietzsche clearly states the desirability of this). But then again, as he also states himself, there are no facts, only interpretations. Everything we think, feel and act is coloured by our own values, usually instilled through the culture we're born and raised in and the moral training we received. So, perhaps it is meaningless to ask for a distinction between propositions and emotional expressions in the first place?

Together with *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) is Nietzsche's clearest work – at least to me. It is also, again together with the other book, the most comprehensive summary of his latter philosophical perspective. In a sense, the three essays of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* are further developments of the major themes he expounded in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. Great books, great thoughts, not so great in accessibility.

Nietzsche writes passionately about three main subjects:

1. Concepts and morality do not have an essence, they are interpreted by human perceptions. So there is no one truth but many truths.
2. There is no truth created by anyone but man himself. Any truth that imposes itself (metaphysical, unique, from God, religious or cultural) are false and serves only to deceive and tame the human being.
3. We are cruel beings, animals of instinct and full of resentment. Systems of power change the direction of this instinct and may even tame the human being, but it does not improve it. Variable instruments are used to tame the human being and create an aura of conformism or oblivion of who we are.

The three provocative chapters written by the passionate style of Nietzsche can be aggressive for many people. He often quotes Jews, women, Aryans, Europeans, and Germans - which today may cause controversies of prejudice and misinterpretation.

Some passages show that Nietzsche cares in the "rivalry" to the ideas of its old friend and "master" (in his words) Schopenhauer. As also to the works of Richard Wagner.

Nietzsche also underestimates or seems to have misunderstood the thoughts of Darwin and Buddhism - which has, in my view, generated criticism and baseless comparisons.

This is a book that carries that delightful sensation of revolt against all systems and institutions; against ourselves. A deeply provocative work.

Nietzsche sets himself upon a gargantuan task with his Genealogy. Within its 3 short essays, and with a mixture of devilish delight and horror, he embarks upon a full excavation of the Western moral system. Primarily deploying etymology and physiology as his methodological devices, he creates a diachronic analysis of some of our most dear, instinctive, and *holy* values.

For Nietzsche, things have gone terribly wrong in Western civilized society: life has turned against itself, the animal in man has been frightened and shocked back inside of himself. Everywhere reactive, negative and enslaving feelings fester. He attributes much of this to what he sees as the rise to prominence of a fundamentally weak and lowly 'slavish' caste, along with their leaders and idols, the ascetic priests.

In his exploration of the genealogy of morals Nietzsche constructs a dualism of morality: a masterly, noble form; and a slavish, weak, common one. Noble morality is heroic; it is a way of living that was pioneered by the most powerful and admired figures of antiquity: the warriors, leaders, emperors, and otherwise god-like figures that dominated ancient societies such as that of the Greeks. Nietzsche etymologically discovers how, in these societies, often words like 'good' were synonymous with words like 'noble', 'aristocratic', 'blessed', 'high-born', and so on, and likewise that words like 'bad' were synonymous with words like 'common', 'low-born', 'unfortunate', 'peasantly', and so on. The rulers of these societies *were* 'the good', and henceforth the morality of the good was simply characterised by the way that these leaders naturally acted. A morality based upon boldness, strength, powerfulness, bravery, as well as the ability to command respect and even fear. Importantly, there is a shared life-affirming quality and in many ways an embodiment of Nietzsche's will to power. In the context of such a positive value-system, 'the bad' are invoked simply as an after-thought: those that are not-strong, not-brave.

The Genealogy is notable, in part, due to the fact that it contains one of Nietzsche's clearest and most extensive elaborations upon his neologistic use of resentment, a purely reactive and negative mode of feeling that functions merely by negating the more positive, pro-active and affirmative values of 'noble' people. These noble people have no problem spontaneously creating values and bring forth action into the world. Men of resentment, however, seem to function solely in the shadow of the pro-active world of the strong. Their only virtue is in their *negation* of active values. Nietzsche tells us that the slave revolt in morality occurs when resentment itself becomes creative, that is to say, when the very act of saying "no" forms the base of a value system. The act of saying "no" to empowerment, to strength, to leadership, to a will to power becomes the mark of the good. Following this cunning swapping of values, men of resentment will then retroactively explain that they *chose* to not be strong, brave, powerful and bold because of the *evil* of these qualities, and in doing so smear the reality (as portrayed by Nietzsche): that they were too weak to be strong, too cowardly to be brave, too impotent to be powerful, and too timid to be bold.

*"The great book of modern ethnology is not so much Mauss's The Gift as Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals. At least it should be. For the Genealogy, the second essay, is an attempt—and a success without equal—at interpreting primitive economy in terms of debt, in the debtor-creditor relationship, by eliminating every consideration of exchange or interest "à l'anglaise." And if they are eliminated from psychology, it is not in order to place them in structure. Nietzsche has only a meager set of tools at his disposal—some ancient Germanic law, a little Hindu law. But he does not hesitate, as does Mauss, between exchange and debt."* - Anti-Oedipus

How is a memory made for man, in whom an active forgetfulness is such an essential quality? The answer is simple: debt. A punishment is given for a payment unfulfilled. How can punishment provide a means of satisfying a debt? *Because of the immense pleasure of cruelty.* Nietzsche goes on to elaborate how for the longest period mankind handed out punishments without the slightest notion of the 'guiltiness' of the offender. It is not until the advent of a

properly organised society that man's animal instincts are forcibly made latent inside himself: \"Pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge and vent itself only on itself\": the modern man of bad conscience is born; and it is not until the deification of those to whom we owe debt, in particular the Christian God, *who died for our sins*, that the man of guilt is born, and that his debt is rendered infinite. The guilt, too, is rendered infinite, as the mark of the infinitude of our sins.

For as long as a slavish people have existed so too have their priests. Weak people will necessarily suffer as a result of their weakness, they require someone or something to lift them out of their listlessness and inertia; the strong are too interested in their heroism to be of any use; whence we find the role of the ascetic priest. They belong to this weak class of sufferers, but they are strong too, strong enough to challenge value systems. They become leaders of the herd. Nietzsche sees in this ascetic ideal, this ideal which seems on the surface to be so turned against life, lurking deep below, an actual affirmative will *to* life, a most subterranean permutation of the will to power. A will to life of the weak. As Nietzsche says: rather a will to nothingness, than to not will at all.