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978-1-107-43723-4 - Nietzsche's: On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide

Edited by Simon May

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## Introduction

*Simon May*

Despite the plethora of writings devoted to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, the publication of a collection of original scholarly essays on this great book is a rare event.

This volume brings together a broad range of prominent philosophers writing in English, from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, so giving a sense for the current state of English-speaking scholarship in the field. Most do not limit themselves to close textual exegesis, but rather treat fundamental themes and aims of the work as a whole, freely discussing their philosophical importance.

### GENEALOGY AND THE "GENEALOGY"

The theme that recurs, perhaps more than any other, is this: what are the nature, role, and scope of genealogy in Nietzsche's critique of morality? Specifically: if Nietzsche wants to undermine morality, why does he need genealogy to do so? Why not cut to the chase and tell us how he thinks our contemporary values and the functions to which they are *now* put stymie our flourishing and betray the standards for it that he explicitly or implicitly sets?

Paul Katsafanas (chapter 8) claims that most interpretations of the *Genealogy* fail to explain why the work's historical form is necessary to Nietzsche's critique of contemporary morality. He argues that the *Genealogy* employs history in order to show that acceptance of modern morality was causally responsible for producing a dramatic change in our affects, drives, and perceptions. This change, according to Katsafanas, caused us to perceive actual increases in power as reductions in power, and actual decreases in power as increases in power. Moreover, it led us to experience negative emotions when engaging in activities that constitute greater manifestations of power, and positive emotions when engaging in activities that reduce

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power. For these reasons, modern morality strongly disposes us to reduce our own power. Given Nietzsche's argument that power has a privileged normative status, this fact, Katsafanas concludes, entails that we have decisive reason to reject modern morality.

Peter Kail (chapter 10) investigates genealogy as philosophical methodology. He discusses what a Nietzschean genealogy might be, how it relates to naturalism, and its normative standing in relation to the project of the "revaluation of values." His chapter begins by arguing for a conception of genealogy *per se* as that of situated psychological explanation of the emergence of beliefs and practices, something that Nietzsche has in common with those he dismissively calls his "English" predecessors. Kail then discusses the sense in which Nietzsche's particular genealogy constitutes, or contributes to, a "critique" of morality, and he argues that its function is a *preparatory* one. The genealogy provides a reason to seek further justification for the central commitments of morality and so prepares the ground for the project of the revaluation of values. It does so by revealing that the sources productive of the relevant moral beliefs are epistemically unreliable, hence depriving such beliefs of their assumed privileged status. Finally Kail compares the conception of genealogy developed here with that of Bernard Williams, and questions not only whether Williams (like Foucault before him) really reflects Nietzsche's approach to genealogy, but also whether there is some distinct method called "genealogy" in the *Genealogy*.

Nadeem Hussain (chapter 7) asks a question that is arguably begged by the *Genealogy*, yet seldom addressed: why doesn't Nietzsche's *own* evaluative standard receive a genealogical critique? After all, Nietzsche assesses the value of the value judgments of morality from the perspective of a very particular, substantive conception of what human flourishing comes to. His positive descriptions of the "higher men" he hopes for and the negative descriptions of the decadent humans he thinks morality supports both point to such a conception. So why exempt it from genealogical scrutiny?

Hussain argues that the answer to this puzzle lies in recognizing the centrality of the notion of "life," and its connection to power, in Nietzsche's overall account. The *Genealogy*, he claims, is a genealogy both of the tendency towards power – a tendency towards dominating and growing that is essential to life, including when it might seem that the opposite is happening, as with the ascetic ideal – and of Nietzsche's affirmation of this tendency. Brian Leiter has argued that his "Millian Model" provides the most charitable reconstruction of appeals to a privileged evaluative standard of power; this model ascribes an inference from a strong doctrine of the will to power according to which only power can be desired. Hussain, by contrast,

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proposes a “Benthamite model” that ascribes an inference from the inescapability of a tendency towards power – and argues that this model avoids the objections that Leiter directs at the Millian model.

## WHY DO THE “MASTERS” SUCCUMB?

But if genealogy, however its nature and scope are precisely to be construed, is so important to Nietzsche's attack on morality, then this raises a very obvious but rather neglected question: Why do noble types end up surrendering to slave morality? Do they accept that there is something wrong with their ethically aristocratic ways? Are they merely overwhelmed by the slaves' cunning and the power of their *ressentiment*? Or is another explanation called for?

Any answers will necessarily be, in considerable part, speculative as Nietzsche provides few clues to why the “slaves” aren't simply dismissed by the “masters,” given the latter's “pathos of distance,” their original position of social power, and their seeming confidence, indeed delight, in their own values.

Lawrence Hatab (chapter 9) argues that the makings of the surrender are to be found in the growing domestication of culture, an exhaustion of externalized power, and the novel attractions of internalized power (one example of which is Socratic dialectic). The complex ambiguities in Nietzsche's analysis of master and slave morality, Hatab suggests, show that the transition not only endangered but also enhanced cultural life – that the brute power of master types could be refined into higher cultural forms when modified by the slave mentality. The “internalized” power of slave morality represented a weakening of more natural instincts, yet also powered new forms of imagination and thought. And despite the dangers involved, the creative types among the mass of slave types displayed a re-routing of master energies in the direction of reflective cultural works that changed the world.

But, one might reply to Hatab, is there any evidence that the original nobles care about higher culture? And, if not, how do the slaves manage to get them to do so? R. Lanier Anderson's contribution (chapter 2) suggests an intriguing answer to the latter question: they don't. The primary architects of the slave revolt aren't slaves at all: they are nobles. Specifically, they are “priests.”

Nietzsche's condemnation of the “*ressentiment* priest” or the “ascetic priest,” and of his key role in the slave revolt, might, Anderson suggests, cause us to conclude that Nietzsche's priests are paradigmatic slave types.

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And that primary agency in the slave revolt must rest with slavish types. But this cannot be right. Nietzsche is clear, says Anderson (focusing principally on the first essay), that the priests are intended to be *nobles*. Indeed, it is crucial to the argument of the first essay that the priests are *nobler* than certain other noble types whom they oppose. Moreover, there are reasons – tied to Nietzsche's conceptions of the noble and slave types – to think that he introduced the priests into the *Genealogy's* story of slave revolt in the first place precisely because he needed them to serve as value creators who *invent* slave morality, and thereby set the revolt in motion. If *ressentiment* priests, rather than slaves, have primary agency in the slave revolt, it becomes clearer why Nietzsche thought that a vengeful orientation and troubling self-deception are deeply built into the very values of slave morality, and thus why his genealogy amounts to a serious critique of conventional morality.

#### RESSENTIMENT

So how can we characterize that psychological condition of *ressentiment* with which the priest so artfully works? In a wide-ranging essay (chapter 6) on the nature, value, and intent of *ressentiment*, Peter Poellner asks, *inter alia*, whether Nietzsche's genealogical account is coherent; if it is, whether he commits the "genetic fallacy"; and what precisely are the grounds of Nietzsche's critique of a morality involving *ressentiment*.

Poellner argues that *ressentiment* should be understood as an intentional *project of object mastery*, although recent critics of intentionalist construals (Wallace, Bittner) are right to insist that it cannot be a reflective strategy. He draws on theories of pre-reflective consciousness associated with the phenomenological tradition to explain how an intentionalist construal of *ressentiment* as a project can avoid the so-called paradoxes of self-deception and the charge of incoherence.

He then outlines some conditions which Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* would have to satisfy to be suitable as a critical tool in the manner intended by him. Poellner claims that while this theory is more successful than is sometimes assumed in meeting some of these conditions, it fails to support Nietzsche's radical claim that the morality criticized by him cannot be understood without reference to its supposed psychological origin in *ressentiment*. Though *ressentiment* is a real and important phenomenon, it cannot play the fundamental explanatory role Nietzsche assigns to it. Finally, Poellner turns to the grounds of Nietzsche's criticism of *ressentiment* and concludes that they concern primarily its intrinsic, rather than merely instrumental, disvalue.

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## GUILT

However the “slave revolt in morals” gains traction over non-priestly noble types, and however we characterize the role of *ressentiment* in this process, there is no doubt that, for Nietzsche, a certain type or use of guilt is central to the operation of slave morality.

In his reading of the second essay of the *Genealogy*, Bernard Reginster (chapter 3) argues that it is not correct to interpret Nietzsche's primary objective there as challenging the non-naturalistic account of the feeling of guilt found in Christian moral psychology (as a manifestation of “the voice of God in man”). Nietzsche's aim, Reginster proposes, is rather to show that the Christian representation of guilt is, in fact, not an account of the ordinary feeling of guilt (the diminution of one's worth as a person when one falls short of certain normative expectations), but a perversion of it, which results from its exploitation as an instrument of self-directed cruelty. Christian guilt is therefore not the ordinary moral emotion of guilt, responsive to reasons, but what Reginster calls a “rational passion.” By which he means a passion to which only a rational being is susceptible because it essentially exploits his responsiveness to reason – and which, unlike other passions, not only overrides, but actually corrupts, this responsiveness to reason.

Reginster goes on to argue that the second essay offers important elements of an account of ordinary guilt – but only those elements that are relevant to Nietzsche's diagnosis of Christian guilt as a perverted use of it. It does not intend to offer the complete account of the emergence of the ordinary feeling of guilt that commentators have been at pains to extract from it. For instance, it virtually ignores the role of free will in the feeling of guilt, and does not even attempt to offer a genealogy of the notion of categorical obligation, which it crucially presupposes. Reginster argues that Nietzsche's primary aim is to explain the development of the ordinary feeling of guilt into the Christian notion of inexpiable guilt before God – and that his chief hypothesis is that this development takes place when the feeling of guilt is appropriated by the will to power under social conditions in which the possibilities for its gratification are severely limited. (In this context, Reginster relates it illuminatingly to Freud's account of the origin of guilt in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.)

Reginster's discussion of ordinary guilt and its distinction from the Christian representation of guilt points us towards a large and vexed question: what would a post-Christian and indeed post-moral life look like? A life that is beyond good and evil, though not beyond good and

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bad; a life that has conquered God and nothingness; a life that has found a meaning no longer structured by the ascetic ideal. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this question elicits a wide and not always compatible range of views in this volume.

### “EVIL”

Raymond Geuss (chapter 1) asks what future the concept of “evil” might have in the light of Nietzsche’s genealogical investigation, which has revealed “evil” to be how the weak originally characterize the actions of those by whom they feel oppressed and on whom they wish to take revenge, if only imaginary. He warns that replacing or revaluing a moral conception is slow and hard, and is not at all like revising a straightforwardly wrong proposition based on new evidence. Moral conceptions express a kind of person, and so are very deeply ingrained. Indeed, replacing them is slower and harder than revising our tables of vices and virtues. For the concept of “evil” is not like a specific vice: it a structural feature of all vices, a second-order interpretive term, which shows how individual vices are to be understood by reference to some underlying structural feature that they all have; and as such it is likely to have much more staying power than the vices it orders. Moreover, the *ressentiment* that, according to Nietzsche, motivates it cannot be got rid of easily because it arises naturally from weakness, which is in turn simply a fact about oneself.

Interestingly, Geuss remarks that seeing the untenability of the metaphysics on which “evil” is based – for example, the metaphysics of free will – won’t cause us to abandon the concept. On the contrary, our continuing need to express our *ressentiment* will be likely to make its use *all the more* “obfuscated, hysterical, and toxic.”

The concept of “evil” can, then, be revalued – in other words: its meaning reinterpreted and its extension shifted – only if we somehow get rid of *ressentiment* and its motivations in our own powerlessness, and so no longer need the term “evil” in the same way. If we retain this term we might reserve it, for example, for the intentional and avoidable infliction of great harm, or for especially undesirable traits: traits (analogous to Thomas Aquinas’ “capital vices”) that are not just undesirable in themselves, but structure an entire life in ways that we consider especially bad. We might also place less emphasis on bad intent and more on the power to carry through bad actions than has historically been associated with the Christian system of morality.

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Provided that the new use of “evil” is not connected with imaginary vengefulness – this is the key – it would effectively be a revalued concept. So the question about the future of evil with which Geuss leaves us is this: by what methods, if any, can we control or get rid of our need for vengeance?

## AN “AESTHETICS OF CHARACTER”?

It is sometimes said that Nietzsche’s ideals are “aesthetic,” but Edward Harcourt (chapter 12) is skeptical. He discusses what it is for an ideal of character to be distinctively aesthetic (or for a thinker to have an “aesthetics of character”) – and, by way of comparison, makes special reference to some commentators’ application of the “aesthetic” label to ideals of character in Aristotle, and to the part played in the regulation of behavior by idealized descriptions of character derived from literary fiction. After examining various interpretations of “aesthetic” as applied to ideals of character, he concludes that the term turns out either to be well motivated but not to mark out a genuine ideal; or else to be poorly motivated, whether as a way of marking out an ideal of a distinctive type, or as a way of marking out what is special about Nietzsche’s own ideals, or both. So, tempting as the label may be, if we are to capture what, if anything, is special about Nietzsche’s ideals of character, we are unlikely to help ourselves if we continue to reach for the term “aesthetic” to do the work for us.

## A “NOBLE” CONCEPTION OF BEAUTY

Aaron Ridley (chapter 14) asks what a noble conception of beauty might be – and, more generally, whether Nietzsche’s thoughts about beauty deserve to be taken seriously as a contribution to aesthetics. In other words, do they help us to understand what beauty is, or in what sense beauty is a value for us?

In doing so Ridley argues that the *Genealogy* yields three quite separate conceptions of beauty – two that Nietzsche rejects, with varying degrees of vehemence, and one that he apparently accepts. Least attractive, in Nietzsche’s eyes, is the conception of beauty to be found in Kant and Schopenhauer, a conception rooted in a “No” said to the self – in a form of self-denial that eventuates in “disinterestedness” as an aesthetic ideal. Better, he thinks, although still imperfect, is Stendhal’s conception – that beauty is a promise of happiness – which is affirmative and “interested” but is also other-regarding, and so holds itself at arm’s length from beauty as it really is. The third conception – beauty as, according to Nietzsche, it really

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is – construes it as one name for, or one dimension of, an erotically intense experience of affirmation, a condition in which value attaches, primordially and essentially, to *the self*. The first two conceptions can, in one way or another, be thought of as slavish: the first is grounded in negation; the second presents the non-self as the originary locus of value. The final conception, by contrast, is *noble*: it is both affirmative and self-regarding. Ridley concludes by suggesting that the second conception – Stendhal's – has at least as much to recommend it as does Nietzsche's preferred alternative.

## NIETZSCHEAN EXCELLENCE AND ITS VIRTUES

The egoism of Nietzsche's ideals has given much concern to commentators, partly because it is hard to characterize and partly because it seems so asocial – to put it mildly. Christine Swanton (chapter 13) suggests that this concern is misplaced, and does so by pointing to what Nietzsche calls the “mature individual” who in his terms is an egoist, but of the “mature” sort. She contrasts mature egoism with two forms of immature egoism and with self-sacrificing altruism, all described by Nietzsche. The former are constituted by a faulty conception of one's own good, one concerned with comfort and immediate self-gratification, and by an asocial kind of egoism where one does not respect others. The latter is constituted by an impersonal kind of submersion in the collective or other kinds of altruistic concern where the self “wilts away.”

To draw these distinctions Swanton makes some basic points about the nature and structure of virtue as a character trait, in order to help dispel doubt that for Nietzsche we can have virtues (and vices) as well as simply drives. To understand Nietzsche's notion of a virtue, too, she underlines that for him virtues and vices are not constituted merely by “surface” intentions (or even patterns of surface intentions), or by mere tendencies to action. Rather, as he repeatedly emphasizes, to understand humans fully we need to understand their deeper motivations, which inform the patterns of their intentions and behavior. The complexity of the depth-psychological nature of Nietzsche's understanding of virtue and correlative vices is brought out in her chapter by a discussion of several virtues and their correlative vices, as applied to the “mature egoist,” and the forms of immature egoism and self-sacrificing altruism, especially as discussed in the *Genealogy*. These virtues and vices include assertiveness (contrasted with cruelty), justice (contrasted with punitive rigorism and what Nietzsche calls scientific fairness), objectivity as a virtue (contrasted with “hyperobjective”

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and “hypersubjective” vice, particularly in regard to ethics), mature generosity (contrasted with self-sacrificing charity), independence (contrasted with various excesses of independence), and discipline (contrasted with asceticism as a vice).

Stephen Mulhall (chapter 11) sees Nietzsche's concern with the cultivation of human excellence as neither elitist nor incompatible with liberal democratic aspirations. His wide-ranging chapter offers support to the project (initiated by Stanley Cavell and James Conant) of reading Nietzsche as an Emersonian perfectionist, a project that in philosophical terms requires a radical redrawing of the boundaries between the moral, the political, the aesthetic, and the religious dimensions of human thought and practice. In the *Genealogy* these themes are given a specific inflection that is generated by Nietzsche's prefatory identification of himself as one of the men of knowledge who have remained unknown to themselves. The implications of this self-critical stance are worked out in Mulhall's engagements with Wagner's *Parsifal*, with the issue of the origins and nature of language (its cognitive capacities here being represented as inherently evaluative and expressive of commitment in ways epitomized by promise-making), with the task of turning Christian discourse against itself, and with the internalization of the opposition between master and slave.

## THE “SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUAL”

When searching for a perfect instantiation of Nietzschean virtue, and indeed of his new ideal more generally, it might be tempting to point to the “sovereign individual,” as portrayed in the second essay of the *Genealogy*.

Brian Leiter (chapter 5) takes a fresh look at who this figure is and what he has to do with Nietzsche's conceptions of free will, freedom, and the self. Leiter argues, first, that Nietzsche denies that people ever act freely and that they are ever morally responsible for anything they do; second, that the figure of the “sovereign individual” in no way supports a denial of the first point; and, third, that Nietzsche engages in what Charles Stevenson would have called a “persuasive definition” of the language of “freedom” and “free will,” radically revising the content of those concepts, but in a way that aims to capitalize on their positive emotive valence and authority for his readers.

More precisely, Leiter aims to show that the image of the “sovereign individual” is, in fact, consistent with the reading of Nietzsche as a kind of fatalist, which he has defended at length elsewhere. To show that the image of the “sovereign individual” squares with Nietzsche's fatalism, he distinguishes between two different “deflationary readings” of the passage.

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On one such reading, the figure of the “sovereign individual” is wholly ironic, a mocking of the petit bourgeois who thinks his petty commercial undertakings – his ability to make promises and remember his debts – are the highest fruit of creation. On another deflationary reading, the “sovereign individual” does indeed represent an ideal of the self, one marked by a kind of self-mastery foreign to less coherent selves (whose momentary impulses pull them this way and that); but such a self and its self-mastery constitute, in Nietzschean terms, a fortuitous natural artifact (a bit of “fate”), not an autonomous achievement for which anyone could be responsible. To associate this ideal of the self with the language of “freedom” and “free will” is, Leiter claims, an exercise in “persuasive definition” by Nietzsche, a rhetorical skill of which he was often the master.

## A NEW MEANING FOR SUFFERING?

In the closing sections of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche looks forward, as he does in concluding the previous two essays, to a world free of morality: to a new ideal and a new type of spirit who might embody it. Specifically he seeks a new meaning for suffering – one no longer structured by the ascetic ideal.

In my own chapter (chapter 4) I claim that the *Genealogy*'s success in undermining morality is limited by Nietzsche's conviction that suffering must be given a meaning – a conviction integral to the very tradition of morality that he wishes to overcome. The meanings that Nietzsche gives suffering – in terms of higher goods, such as creativity in art and values and thought, which it makes possible or of which it is constitutive – might themselves be free of moral presuppositions. But, I argue, as long as he even poses the question of the meaning or purpose of suffering he remains within morality, and so cannot fully affirm life. I advance various reasons for this: for example, that all attempts to give suffering a meaning or justification, including one that is life-affirming, are attempts to eviscerate it of what makes it suffering – notably the helplessness at its core – and to that extent are attempts (absurdly) to eliminate it.

I then propose that genuinely to affirm one's own life is to take joy in its “there-ness” or quiddity as a whole – a whole conceived as necessary (or fated) in all its elements and experienced as beautiful. Crucially, such affirmation is in no way grounded in justifications of suffering. It is also, to take a cue from Nietzsche, consistent with “saying No” to particular experiences or events within the whole – though it is not consistent with seeking alternatives to the actual life we have.