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978-0-521-69770-5 - Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: An Introduction

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Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* is a forceful, perplexing, important book. It is widely recognized in philosophical treatments as a major text in Nietzsche's writings, and it has been the focus of much analysis in recent years. The *Genealogy* is taught and assigned in other disciplines as well, particularly in political philosophy and literary theory. One reason for the text's popularity, besides the power of its ideas, is that of all Nietzsche's writings after *The Birth of Tragedy*, it most resembles the form of a "treatise," with extended discussions of organized themes and something of a historical orientation. As distinct from Nietzsche's typical aphoristic or literary styles, the *Genealogy* offers some advantages for classroom investigations. Yet one can hardly call this book a typical academic treatise. Nietzsche calls it a "polemic" and it is loaded with hyperbole, ambiguity, misdirection, allusion, provocation, iconoclasm, invective, prognostication, experiment, and Nietzsche's own vigorous persona.

Since Nietzsche has become a respectable figure in the academy (and he is one of the few post-Kantian continental philosophers taken seriously in Analytic circles), it is hard to appreciate the radical nature of the *Genealogy* in its nineteenth-century setting. Some readings tend to domesticate Nietzsche by pressing the text into the standard logistics of professional philosophers and contemporary theoretical agendas. Other readings miss the intellectual power of the book by overplaying its radical character in the direction of unhinged celebrations of difference and creativity (which actually perpetuates another kind of domestication).

In its own historical moment, the *Genealogy* is something of a bombshell. It aims to diagnose esteemed moral traditions as forms of life-denial, in that what is valued as "good" in these systems stands

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opposed to actual conditions of natural life. Yet Nietzsche's text is not promoting an "immoral" or "amoral" posture on behalf of presumably value-free life forces. Rather, Nietzsche wants to explore new possibilities of life-affirming values by drawing from historical sources that were deemed "immoral" by traditional moral systems, but that can be redeemed as morally defensible life-values. Accordingly, the "polemical" character of the *Genealogy* implies a double-negative structure, a fight against life-denying values on behalf of life-affirming values.

Although Christian morality is a prominent target in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche's critique pertains to much more than simply religion. Christianity was a world-forming force at every level of culture, and Nietzsche maintains that even so-called modern "secular" moralities have not escaped the formative influences of Christianity and its life-negating elements. Moreover, the polemic in the *Genealogy* is not limited to morality narrowly construed as ethics. According to Nietzsche, moralistic judgments against natural life have also marked the bulk of Western intellectual and cultural history, not only in religion and ethics, but also in philosophy, politics, psychology, science, and logic.

These preliminary remarks can be borne out by considering the *Genealogy* in relation to the book immediately preceding it in Nietzsche's published works: *Beyond Good and Evil*. Walter Kaufmann notes that the title page of the *Genealogy* is followed by these words: "A sequel to my last book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, which it is meant to supplement and clarify."¹ "To supplement" translates *Ergänzung*, which can also mean "completion." So it is particularly important to take *Beyond Good and Evil* into account when reading the *Genealogy*. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche says that *Beyond Good and Evil* began his No-saying turn after the Yes-saying force of the *Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, that it began his "great war" against established values (EH III, BGE 1). He further indicates that *Beyond Good and Evil* "is in all essentials a *critique of modernity*, not excluding the modern sciences, modern arts, and even modern politics, along with pointers to a contrary type that is as little modern as possible – a noble, Yes-saying type" (EH III, BGE 2). Thus the *Genealogy*, as a "completion" of this prior book, must also be read as a critique of the

¹ *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 439.

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modern world and the full range of intellectual constructs bearing on modern life. Of course, questions of ethics and politics are at the core of the *Genealogy*, but it should be recognized that its critique of “morality” is also a gateway to larger questions of knowledge, truth, and meaning, the traditional approaches to which Nietzsche diagnoses as likewise harboring moralistic judgments against natural life.

How should the *Genealogy* be approached as a philosophical text? Nietzsche rejects the notion that philosophy is an “impersonal” pursuit of knowledge; philosophy so conceived conceals a “personal confession,” an “unconscious memoir,” and so a philosopher’s thought bears “decisive witness to *who he is*” (*BGE* 6). In considering a philosophical claim, one should ask: “What does such a claim tell us about the man who makes it?” (*BGE* 187). Philosophy can never be separated from existential interests, and so “disinterested knowledge” is a fiction (*BGE* 207; *GM* III, 12, 26). Perspectives of value are more fundamental than objectivity or certainty. There is no being-in-itself, only “grades of appearance measured by the strength of *interest* we show in an appearance” (*WP* 588). Philosophy so construed means that the standard of demonstrable knowledge should be exchanged for the more open concept of “interpretation” (*GS* 374). Interpretation is the “introduction of meaning (*Sinn-hineinlegen*)” and not “explanation” (*KSA* 12, p. 100).²

The logical limits of answers to the deepest intellectual questions are an obvious feature of the history of thought, given the endurance of unresolved critiques and counter-critiques in philosophy. Rather than give up on such questions or resort to mystical, transcendent, even relativistic solutions, Nietzsche focuses on philosophy as an embodied expression of psychological forces. Critical questions that follow such a focus would no longer turn on cognitive tests (How can you prove X?) but on psychological explorations and probes (Why is X *important* to you?). Accordingly, for Nietzsche, philosophy is always value-laden and cannot be reduced to descriptive, objective terms or to a project of logical demonstration; and he is consistent in recognizing this in the course of his own writing: “What have I to do with refutations!” (*GM* I, 4). He often enough indicates that

² For an important study, see Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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philosophy, including his own textual work, is a circulation of writing and reading that stems from, and taps into, personal forces and dispositions toward life. This does not mean that philosophy is nothing more than personal expression, even though the first person singular appears so often in Nietzsche's texts. For one thing, Nietzsche deploys the "we" as much as the "I," which suggests the importance of collective dimensions in culture. Moreover, Nietzsche explores a full range of philosophical questions about reality, the world, life, knowledge, and truth, with the aim of advancing compelling answers to these questions. Yet he insists that such advances cannot be understood adequately in a purely third-person fashion, *apart from* their meaning for human interests in the life-world.

The prevalence of the "I" and the "we" in Nietzsche's writings also implies a pervasive second-person perspective, that of "you" the reader. That is why we must engage Nietzsche's texts in their "addressive" function, because "reader response" is inseparable from the nature of a written text. Nietzsche's stylistic choices – hyperbole, provocation, allusions, metaphors, aphorisms, literary forms, and historical narratives not confined to demonstrable facts or theories – show that he presumed a reader's involvement in bringing sense to a text, even in exploring beyond or against a text. Nietzsche's books do not presume to advance "doctrines" as a one-way transmission of finished thoughts. Good readers must be active, not simply reactive; they must think for themselves (*EH* II, 8). Aphorisms, for example, cannot merely be read; they require an "art of interpretation" on the part of readers (*GM* P, 8). Nietzsche wants to be read "with doors left open" (*D* P, 5). This does not mean that Nietzsche's texts are nothing but an invitation for interpretation. Nietzsche's *own* voice and positions are central to his writings, and he takes many forceful stands on philosophical questions. Yet he did not write as, and did not want to be read as, a typical philosopher constructing arguments in pursuit of "objective truth." Whatever truth comes to mean in Nietzsche's philosophy, it cannot be a strictly objective or logical enterprise because truth must be *alive* in writers and readers.³

³ An excellent study in this respect is David B. Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

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Nietzsche's vivid address to the cultural "we" and to "you" the reader is a baseline textual feature of the *Genealogy*, despite its surface resemblance to a treatise form. The book aims to stimulate an "introduction of meaning" between writer and reader which reaches further than the written text as such. Moreover, the question of meaning forged in the book presents deep challenges and dark provocations to traditional confidences and normal expectations about philosophy. Here is what Nietzsche says about the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo*:

Regarding expression, intention, and the art of surprise, the three inquiries which constitute this *Genealogy* are perhaps uncannier than anything else written so far... Every time a beginning that is *calculated* to mislead: cool, scientific, even ironic, deliberately foreground, deliberately holding off. Gradually more unrest; sporadic lightning; very disagreeable truths are heard rumbling in the distance – until eventually a *tempo feroce* is attained in which everything rushes ahead in a tremendous tension. In the end, in the midst of perfectly gruesome detonations, a *new* truth becomes visible every time among thick clouds. (*EH* III, GM)

As indicated earlier, some treatments of the *Genealogy*, while recognizing its unusual features, move to position the text in terms of current philosophical methods and agendas, or to situate it among previous thinkers and standard philosophical concepts. Other treatments take the book to be more wide open or enigmatic than any such placement. Much can be gained from all such approaches, but I have always been dissatisfied with them. Nietzsche was surely pursuing philosophical work of the highest order, and yet he specifically found fault with most philosophical methods as typically construed; and he challenged most traditional philosophical concepts as inadequate to the task of thinking. Nietzsche was a trained classicist, and so he knew quite well standard scholarly techniques and could have so deployed them in his writings. That he deliberately did otherwise shows that he *intended* his texts to display a disruptive *tension* with traditional academic work.

My own approach to the *Genealogy* can be summarized as follows: I try as far as possible to read the text on its own terms, in its own movements and counter-movements, with its own language and thought experiments. I try to avoid "translating" the text into this or that "theory" or this or that "-ism" or "-ology." I do this not out of some mere exegetical constraint of textual fidelity, but because

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Nietzsche's text has its own kind of philosophical power that can be missed or suppressed when translated into familiar scholarly settings.⁴

In the Preface to the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche grants that some readers might find the book “incomprehensible and hard on the ears” (GMP, 8). He then suggests that the book will be clearer to those who “have first read my earlier works without sparing themselves some effort or trouble (*Mühe*).” Thus reading the *Genealogy* without much background in Nietzsche's thought can be a disadvantage. That is why my first chapter will provide an orientation in Nietzsche's philosophy that should provide some help. Succeeding chapters will take up the Preface and the three Essays of the *Genealogy*, moving through the numbered sections of the Essays in sequence. Yet my treatment cannot simply inhabit each section in its own textual space, because some flexibility is required in moving around the text for cross-referencing, and occasional excursions to some of Nietzsche's other books can be illuminating (this is particularly true with respect to *Beyond Good and Evil*, as has been noted). Also, in the course of my analysis, there will be occasional “Interludes” that engage supplemental topics or questions that should enhance comprehension of the material at hand. My hope is to provide readers of the *Genealogy* with as rich and nuanced an understanding of the book as possible. Yet the precautions about Nietzsche's writings sketched in this Introduction should always be kept in mind. As Nietzsche puts it (GMP, 8), his books “are indeed not easily accessible,” and the *Genealogy* in particular requires “an art of interpretation,” which is articulated as an “art of reading, a thing which today people have been so good at forgetting – and so it will be some time before my writings are ‘readable’ –, you almost have to be a cow for this one thing and certainly *not* a ‘modern man’: it is *rumination*.” “Rumination” is a translation of *Wiederkäuen*, literally “chewing again,” or “chewing over” a text in a slow, careful manner.

⁴ For the purposes of my commentary, I will not overload the text with extensive discussions of the secondary literature, yet I will try to give readers enough guidance for recognizing and exploring a host of relevant scholarly treatments. Several sources will be drawn from the following collections: *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

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As we will see, Nietzsche is notorious for castigating the “herd” and celebrating the “beast of prey.” Yet it is interesting that, with respect to reading, he recommends a cow-like pace rather than, shall we say, “wolfing down” a text in big chunks, too quickly to savor every particle of thought. For Nietzsche, to read well is to “read slowly” (*DP*, 5). It is not simply a matter of speed here, but the kinds of analytical chunks that frame the text in familiar shapes, which are then swallowed whole. Moreover, we know that chewing food well is good for both our taste and our stomachs. Reading the *Genealogy* with rumination will not only reveal more complex and subtle flavors, it will also decrease the chances of indigestion.

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CHAPTER I

Nietzsche's thought and life

What follows is not an overview of all or most of the main elements of Nietzsche's thought but a sketch of those elements that I think will have particular relevance in engaging the *Genealogy*.¹

FROM METAPHYSICS TO NATURALISM

We can best gain entry to Nietzsche's philosophy by beginning with his critique of metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, "the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*" (BGE 2). The Western religious and philosophical tradition has operated by dividing reality into a set of binary opposites, such as constancy and change, eternity and time, reason and passion, good and evil, truth and appearance – opposites that can be organized around the concepts of being and becoming. The motivation behind such divisional thinking is as follows: Becoming names the negative and unstable conditions of existence that undermine our interest in grasping, controlling, and preserving life (because of the pervasive force of uncertainty, variability, destruction, and death). Being, as *opposite* to becoming, permits the governance or exclusion of negative conditions and the attainment of various forms of stability untainted by their fluid contraries.

Nietzsche wants to challenge the priority of being in the tradition, so much so that he is often read as simply reversing this scheme by extolling sheer becoming and all its correlates. This is not the case, even though Nietzsche will often celebrate negative terms rhetorically

¹ Much of this chapter is drawn from Chapter 1 of my *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

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to unsettle convictions and open up space for new meanings. In fact, Nietzsche exchanges oppositional exclusion for a sense of *crossing*, where the differing conditions in question are not exclusive of each other, but rather reciprocally related.² Nietzsche suggests that “what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things” (*BGE* 2). Rather than fixed contraries, Nietzsche prefers “differences of degree” and “transitions” (*WS* 67). Even the idea of sheer becoming cannot be maintained, according to Nietzsche. Discernment of such becoming can only arise once an imaginary counter-world of being is placed against it (*KSA* 9, pp. 503–504). As we will see shortly, Nietzsche rejects the strict delineation of opposite conditions, but not the oppositional *force* between these conditions. He grants that circumstances of struggle breed in opponents a tendency to “imagine” the other side as an “antithesis,” for the purpose of exaggerated self-esteem and the courage to fight the “good cause” against deviancy (*WP* 348). Yet this tendency breeds the danger of oppositional exclusion and its implicit denial of becoming’s “medial” structure, a structure based on an *inclusive* tension with opposing forces in any particular position. A theme that will recur again and again in this study is that Nietzsche will exchange binary clarity for a sense of *ambiguity*, because a proper understanding of any philosophical topic will have to reflect an irresolvable mix of tensions: “Above all, one should not want to divest existence of its *rich ambiguity*” (*GS* 373).

In restoring legitimacy to conditions of becoming, Nietzsche advances what I call an *existential naturalism*. The finite, unstable dynamic of earthly existence – and its meaningfulness – becomes the measure of thought, to counter various attempts in philosophy and religion to “reform” lived experience by way of a rational, spiritual, or moral “transcendence” that purports to rectify an originally flawed condition (*GS* 109; *TI* 3, 16). In turning to “the basic text of *homo natura*” (*BGE* 230), Nietzsche is not restricting his philosophy to what we would call scientific naturalism, which in many ways locates itself on the “being” side of the ledger. For

² I borrow the term “crossing” from John Sallis’ *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

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Nietzsche, nature is more unstable and disruptive than science would allow; it includes forces, instincts, passions, and powers that are not reducible to objective, scientific categories. Stressing a darker sense of “nature red in tooth and claw,” Nietzsche claims that “the terrible (*schreckliche*) basic text of nature must again be recognized” (*BGE* 230). Nietzsche’s naturalism is consonant with scientific naturalism in rejecting “supernatural” beliefs, but the source of these beliefs, for Nietzsche, stems not from a lack or refusal of scientific thinking, but from an aversion to overwhelming and disintegrating forces in nature that science too suppresses and wants to overcome. Indeed, Nietzsche identifies nature with chaos, as indicated in his alteration of Spinoza’s famous equation: “*chaos sive natura*” (*KSA* 9, p. 519).³ At the same time, Nietzsche also rejects a romantic naturalism, which spurns science or reason and calls for a return to an original condition of innocence and harmony with nature (*GS* 370). Naturalism, for Nietzsche, amounts to a kind of philosophical methodology, in that natural forces of becoming will be deployed to redescribe and account for all aspects of life, including cultural formations, even the emergence of seemingly anti-natural constructions of “being.” The focus for this deployment can be located in Nietzsche’s concept of will to power, to be discussed shortly. First, however, we must locate the historical focus for Nietzsche’s naturalistic turn, namely the death of God.

THE DEATH OF GOD

Nietzsche advances the death of God through the figure of a madman (*GS* 125), whose audience is not religious believers, but nonbelievers who are chastised for not facing the consequences of God’s demise. Since God is the ultimate symbol of transcendence and foundations, his death is to be praised, but its impact reaches far beyond religion. In the modern world God is no longer the mandated centerpiece of intellectual and cultural life. But historically the notion of God had been the warrant for all sorts of cultural constructs in moral,

³ See Babette Babich, “A Note on *Chaos Sive Natura*: On Theogony, Genesis, and Playing Stars,” *New Nietzsche Studies* 5, 3/4 and 6, 1/2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), 48–70. For an insightful treatment of Nietzsche’s naturalism, see Christoph Cox, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).