

Ata Zargarpour - Tutorial 2

Section 5, Paper 2

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6. “The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* 36).

Discuss.

Throughout his *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche’s ultimate intentions in performing a reevaluation of values remain persistently ambiguous; nevertheless, his use of language allows us to corroborate certain possibilities. Chief among these is that Nietzsche desires the affirmation of life (Cohon, “Nietzsche I: Genealogy of Good and Evil”). Nietzsche’s critique of the slave ethic strongly suggests that hierarchy is the most life-affirming arrangement possible.

As explained in his “Preface,” the aim of Nietzsche’s project is to determine whether or not “a symptom of regression were inherent in the “good,” likewise a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 20). Given that contemporary morality is, for Nietzsche, in fact based on the ancient *ressentiment* of the slave class (33-34), his analysis of the latter is really a diagnosis of the former. That Nietzsche continually employs the language of health and sickness is also pertinent to our discussion. For him,

[t]here is from the first something *unhealthy* in [...] priestly aristocracies and in the habits ruling in them [...]; but as to that which they themselves devised as a remedy for this morbidity—must one not assert that it has ultimately proved itself a hundred times more dangerous in its effects than the sickness it was supposed to cure? (32)

Slave morality being the fruit of this priestly class (46-48), Nietzsche evidently considers it to be incommensurately more detrimental to life than the already “unhealthy” habits of its progenitors. Indeed, his repeated use of the word “poison” with reference to this moral system compounds this emphasis (20, 36). Furthermore, when its propounder, the ascetic priest, “stills the pain of the wound[,] *he at the same time infects the wound* [...] this sorcerer and animal-tamer, in whose presence everything healthy grows sick” (126). Insofar as it “makes men indolent” (32) in this way, this slave ethic represents “an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life” (162-63). Evidently, then, Nietzsche equates health with life. In contrast to the slave ethic, “[t]he knightly-aristocratic value judgements presupposed a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health” (33); Nietzsche describes these nobles “as rounded men replete with energy” (37). Thus, noble morality both encourages and reinforces the exact state of being—namely, an overflow of healthful life—of which Nietzsche is so very desirous. His contrast of the deficiency inherent to the slave ethic with the robust exuberance which characterizes noble morality betrays an obvious preference for the former and a repulsion at the latter. Interestingly, Nietzsche repeatedly appeals to an altogether natural touchstone in order to determine the degree to which a moral system is life-affirming. According to him, the slave ethic, by prescribing that which “runs counter to sense, instinct, nature, [and] animal, [is] hostile to life” (95). Nietzsche even claims to obtain from nature the licence to

extirpate the ascetic ideal underlying the slave ethic: “why did nature give me my foot? [...] for kicking to pieces [...] this flirting with ascetic ideals [...]!” (158). Given what we have established, the underlying assumption is that nature, in favouring healthful life, favours noble morality. On these grounds, Nietzsche appears to favour noble morality.

Nietzsche’s analysis is not confined to the realm of personal preference; indeed, there are prescriptive undertones to his thought that occasionally burst forth with astonishing force:

To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is [...] absurd (45)

Bearing in mind his descriptions of the noble class as essentially vigorous, Nietzsche is effectively scorning the notion that its members should ever curb their bloodthirsty physicality. Given their inherently dominant nature, this would necessarily amount to a hierarchical arrangement, where the noble aggressors establish their dominance over the impotent slave class. This subjugation, then, is an inherent property of Nietzsche’s ideal state of being. Indeed, Nietzsche repudiates the existence of “a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which [is] *free* to express strength or not to do so”; he unequivocally asserts that “[t]here is no such substratum” (45). Thus, not only are the strong not obligated to cap the overflowing fount of their power, but such self-restraint is actually impossible. This means that hierarchy and the domination it entails are not only preferable, but inevitable. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of how the unmitigated expression of the will to power, which is for Nietzsche the essential prerequisite for human fulfillment, does not necessarily require subjugation. To a word: where, if

not in the context of noble morality, can Nietzsche's life-affirming principle be located? Finally, in his "Third Essay," Nietzsche asserts:

A predominance of mandarins always means something is wrong; so do the advent of democracy, international courts in place of war, equal rights for women, the religion of pity, and whatever other symptoms of declining life there are. (154)

Notably, every one of these civilizational developments which Nietzsche denounces as deleterious to life entails a movement away from hierarchical arrangement—and its corollary, oppression—towards greater equality: democracy levels the political playing-field; the disappearance of war eliminates the possibility of national domination; women's rights precludes male superiority; and religious compassion upraises the sick and destitute, counteracting the natural forces that would have them perish otherwise. Thus, however unpalatable, the desirability of a kind of noble morality in Nietzsche's eyes is a rather unavoidable problem. While Nietzsche does not, of course, expressly propose the active reestablishment of such a moral system, his wish that the aggressive impulses of the robust noble class go unmitigated necessitates it.

I should mention that Nietzsche sees in the ascetic ideal an understandable but ultimately suffocating response to the riddle of existence (162): notwithstanding its devastation of the human spirit, Nietzsche recognizes that "man was *saved*" as a result of the meaning with which this ideal endued his suffering (162), and acknowledges that "[h]uman history would be altogether too stupid a thing without the spirit that the impotent have introduced into it" (33). Man's asceticism can therefore be understood as but one stage in the development of his soul, a sort of momentarily necessarily lie whose offices have now grown obsolete. Nietzsche considers the next stage in human moral development to be imminent; for "[a]s the will to truth gains self-

consciousness—there can be no doubt of that—morality will gradually *perish* now” (161). As for this next stage, he makes it quite clear that “the higher [...] are alone our *warranty* for the future, they alone are *liable* for the future of man” (124-25). Thus, Nietzsche’s vision for the future unmistakably locates mankind’s salvation in the noble class. Indeed, he asserts that

no greater or more calamitous misunderstanding is possible than for the happy, well-constituted, powerful in soul and body, to begin to doubt their *right to happiness* in this fashion. Away with this “inverted world”! Away with this shameful emasculation of feeling! (124)

While this prescription is a negative one, imploring the end of the ascetic withering of life, it comes alarmingly to an explicit insistence on the reestablishment of noble morality. This is because Nietzsche neglects to delineate a positive remedy for the spiritual affliction which he laments. Owing to this remedial obscurity, a problem arises: there is nothing to suggest that the “slave revolt in morality” would not reoccur following this return to noble morality (36), thereby condemning ethics to a kind of cyclical perpetuity. Concerning a possible solution to this problem, Nietzsche is ambiguous; his description of the coming moral revolution as “the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles” is aggravatingly vague, even tenuous (161). Nietzsche further complicates things by claiming: “I also do not like these [...] anti-Semites, who today [...] exhaust one’s patience by trying to rouse up all the horned-beast elements in the people” (158). This astonishing turn seems fundamentally to disagree with every preceding statement we have reviewed thus far: here, Nietzsche is expressly against the attempt to encourage or manipulate the dominant, noble instincts in a population towards prejudicial ends. While this apparently blatant contradiction opens up new vistas of

possible interpretation, the attempt to understand Nietzsche's mind leads one invariably into a quagmire of untenable speculation. If a clear solution or explanation was ever formulated by Nietzsche, it remains beyond the scope of this paper, insofar as Nietzsche evidently considered it beyond the scope of the *Genealogy*. Our only recourse therefore being speculation at the expense of scholarly integrity, I have elected to omit such a discussion from this paper.

As Cohoon notes, and as the language of the *Genealogy of Morals* strongly suggests, Nietzsche seeks and advocates for a morality that affirms life. Problematically, however, Nietzsche's diagnosis of contemporary morality as essentially diseased and thoroughly wanting acquires an aggressive prescriptive undertone which leaves noble morality as the only conceivable alternative. This is because the life-force intrinsically seeks to exert itself over others; and noble morality, in endorsing the liberation thereof, reinforces life. Thus, Nietzsche's thought implicitly demands the reestablishment of a hierarchical arrangement. While there are startling moments in the text which seem to oppose this interpretation, there is insufficient evidence with which to attenuate its darker implications. The tentative hopefulness of his philosophy is undercut by the knowledge of its vulnerability to Fascist appropriation; indeed, regardless of his intentions, it plays haplessly into the hands of the oppressor, providing them with the licence to ruthless brutality.

Works Cited

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