

The Skeptic's Guide to the Genealogy

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to evaluate Nietzsche's positive ethical vision through a focus on the plausibility of his moral-historical account as it appears in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. It is then argued that Nietzsche's account of the "slave revolt in morality" contains shortcomings that necessitate further inquiry into Nietzsche's consequent ethical vision. Furthermore, the paper goes on to demonstrate that if a proper historical context for the "slave revolt in morality" cannot be identified, or if it cannot be shown that Nietzsche's ethical vision can stand without such a context, then a neo-Nietzschean ethic must be set aside.



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Though Friedrich Nietzsche attacks modern conventional morality, there exists within his body of work a prescriptive understanding of *man-as-he-really-is*. Pursuit of the fulfillment of human nature as Nietzsche sees it will hereafter be referred to as Nietzsche's positive ethical vision. The general effort approached herein is an evaluation of this ethical vision. The specific problem which attaches to the general effort is the plausibility of his moral-historical account in *On The Genealogy Of Morals*. Insofar as the latter is seen to effect the former, a revaluation of Nietzsche's

positive ethic is suggested. Specifically, shortcomings in Nietzsche's account of the "slave revolt in morality" motivate an inquiry into the ethic which, in part, follows from it.¹ I propose that any assent to a neo-Nietzschean ethic must be set aside until an appropriate historical context can be found, or it can be convincingly shown that there is no necessary connection between his ethic and any putative historical account which justifies it. Those views considered herein are largely original, with the occasional help of Nickolas Pappas' *The Nietzsche Disappointment*, to which I am indebted.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals And Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 36.



Nietzsche's Positive Ethical Vision

In the absence of a proper treatise from Friedrich Nietzsche on his positive ethics, any systematic account of which – hampered by his oft indirect and polemical style – may proceed only from a patient analysis of “(1) what Nietzsche values, (2) what his criteria of evaluation are, and (3) what evaluative structure, if any, is exhibited by the answers to (1) and (2).”² Our expectations, then, are tempered by the difficulty of Nietzschean exegesis and the speculative nature of the effort. Indeed, Leiter warns, “We go wrong at the start...if we expect Nietzsche to produce a normative theory of any familiar kind.”³ Since reams have been written in pursuit of such an account and its utility here is merely prefatory, I submit to scholarly analysis. After all, Pappas advises that Nietzsche will yield his secrets more readily to a “sly reconnoitering” than a full-on “frontal assault.”⁴ For Ernst Behler, whether Nietzsche’s thought can be systematized is the “central question that perhaps every interpretation of Nietzsche must raise; namely, whether the philosopher’s aphoristic and fragmentary text, which apparently rejects final principles and systematic coherence, nevertheless can be read in the style of traditional metaphysics.”⁵ Finding Leiter’s three analytic criteria pursuant to

this end, we proceed with caution.

Several prescriptive themes are discovered by the application of said criteria to Nietzsche’s writings. First, we find that “higher types are solitary and deal with others only instrumentally.”⁶ Second, we find that the “well-turned out person... has a taste only for what is good for him; his pleasure, his delight cease where the measure of what is good for him is transgressed.”⁷ Third, self-reverence – “to revere and respect oneself as one might a god” – is arguably the highest Nietzschean virtue.⁸ These are core tenets of Nietzsche’s loose normative schema and the extent of that which, albeit meager and rather ambiguous, may be concluded positively.

Ultimately, we find that we must resort to that which is critical in Nietzsche’s moral philosophy – of which there is, by contrast, no paucity – to fill out our understanding of his positive ethical vision. It is not a question of how Nietzsche would have us conduct ourselves, for this kind of question commonly has in view some code of conduct – a set of moral imperatives which directs human behavior. This is exactly the kind of morality that Nietzsche abhors. The question to ask Nietzsche is, “What kind of lifestyle worst conforms to human nature?” And, of course, the answer differentiates with respect to the character of the questioner, whether higher or lower in Nietzsche’s estimation,

2. Brian Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 27, 2007, Stanford University Metaphysics Research Lab, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/#2> (accessed May 3, 2008).

3. Leiter.

4. Nickolas Pappas, *The Nietzsche Disappointment* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), xiii.

5. Ernst Behler, *Confrontations: Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 10.

6. Leiter.

7. *Ecce Homo* I2.

8. Leiter.

with exclusive preference given to his higher type. It suffices to say that I should think the vast majority of readers would take issue with this kind of morality or lack thereof (I am not sure how to tell between the two in this case), if not in principle, then most assuredly in practice. Moreover, there is a strong case to be made that a world full of Nietzscheans would be a most dysfunctional world. But this kind of visceral reaction is entirely beside the point. If we take issue with Nietzsche's positive ethical vision, it must be for a more substantive reason. Thus is the argument which follows.

Nietzsche's Moral Account: The Slave Revolt in Morality

A précis of Nietzsche's argument is in order: Dissatisfied with the myopic attempts of "English" psychologists (e.g. Paul Rée), with their utilitarian bias, to explain the origin of morality as the unegoistic action forgotten, Nietzsche endeavors to explain the "good" in terms - literally speaking - of those whom themselves were "good" (i.e. the noble and the powerful), rather than those to whom goodness was first shown.⁹ Nietzsche's philologic inclination is made evident as he elaborates on this thesis. Employing linguistic analysis to support it, he remarks that the word for "good," in many languages, shares a root with the words "powerful," "rich," and "master". By contrast, he notes the association between the German word "bad," and the words, "plain" and "simple."¹⁰ These linguistic

observations motivate the hypothetical framework for understanding the origin of morality which follows.

In what seems the central idea of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, he points to the interaction between what he labels elsewhere "master morality" and "slave morality" and the proliferation of the latter as responsible for the Judeo-Christian ethic which prevails in modernity. Master morality belonged to the masters - powerful noble and warrior archetypes - who understood and defined themselves as "good," true to its etymological past. Their attributes of wealth, power, health, and happiness were "good" by association. The master, moreover, concerned himself with little else than the interests of self. Thus, his understanding of the "bad" developed only as an afterthought, enhancing self-perception by the contrast the master saw between himself and the plebeian "slaves" and ascetics, who were generally poor and weak and often sick. At variance with the masters and their robust attributes, the impotence of the slaves and, in turn, the slaves themselves embodied the "bad." This understanding of "good" and "bad" constitutes master morality.¹¹

In the face of opposition and oppression, the slaves began to resent the warrior caste. Yet powerless, the slaves could not seek revenge outwardly; rather, this resentment became a creative force, turning inward to invent an imaginary revenge - the slave morality. Negative and reactive, the slave morality condemned the master and his "evil" character. Further, the slaves invented

9. *On the Genealogy of Morals* II.

10. *On the Genealogy of Morals* 5-13.

11. *Ibid*



promises of blessing and eternal bliss for the meek to vindicate their temporal suffering and inferiority. Diametrically, the “good” for the slaves came as an afterthought, necessarily emphasizing kindness, humility, patience and other virtues that stood in contrast to master morality. As resentment poisoned and consumed the slaves, they schemed together against the masters, becoming cleverer and craftier than the unsuspecting nobles. This conspiracy ultimately lead to the “slave revolt in morality,” the forceful overthrow of the masters and the universal imposition of the slave morality. Thus, the perverse moral revaluation employed thereafter disoriented moral language, supplanting the “good” of the masters with the “evil” of the slaves.¹²

Nietzsche’s Historical Account: the Judeo-Roman Context

The questions must then be asked: Within what historical context is Nietzsche’s genealogy to be understood? How is it properly and accurately manifest? Colloquially, we could ask just how does this account map onto history? Hitherto, I have, for the sake of concision, been compelled to summarize Nietzsche’s arguments. Hereafter, I cannot deny the reader access to Nietzsche proper. Listen to Nietzsche himself, from the first essay of the *Genealogy*, on the dawn of the slave revolt:

All that has been done on earth against “the noble,” “the powerful,” “the masters,” “the rulers,” fades into nothing compared with

what the Jews have done against them; the Jews... were ultimately satisfied with nothing less than a radical revaluation of their enemies’ values... It was the Jews, who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth... saying “the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone – and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned!” – that with the Jews there begins *the slave revolt in morality*...¹³

How did this happen? Nietzsche elaborates:

This Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate gospel of love, this “Redeemer” who brought blessedness and victory to the poor, the sick, and the sinners – was he not this seduction in its most uncanny and irresistible form... Was it not part of the secret black art of truly grand politics of revenge, of a farseeing, subterranean, slowly advancing, and premeditated revenge, that Israel must itself deny the real instrument of its revenge before all the world as a mortal enemy and nail it to the cross, so that... all the opponents of Israel, could unhesitatingly swallow just this bait?¹⁴

12. Ibid.

13. *On the Genealogy of Morals* I 7.

14. *On the Genealogy of Morals* I 8.

There are three essential observations of the Jewish “slave revolt in morality.” First, though not explicitly identified in either of these passages, one may reasonably infer that the master caste is that of the Roman occupation of Judea, which had been conquered by the Roman general Pompey in 63 B.C.¹⁵ Nietzsche clarifies this point later in the *First Essay*, pitting “Judea against Rome.”¹⁶ Second, Nietzsche affirms that the slave revolt begins with the Jews through Jesus of Nazareth. Third, the Jews succeed in the dissemination of a “radical revaluation of their enemies’ values.”

The Plausibility of Nietzsche’s Moral-Historical Account

The Judeo-Roman context for the slave revolt sounds plausible *prima facie*. However, scrupulous attention to the Gospel account, upon which Nietzsche’s contextualization rests, and germane histories of this period yields discord with the aforementioned third observation. I will, in turn, attempt to reveal this discord with three conflicting observations from the Gospel and other records.

First, there is a strong case to be made from the Acts of the Apostles, immediately succeeding the four gospels in the New Testament, that Jesus was no ally of the Jews. Acts records, at length, the martyrdom of the Early Church at the hands of militant Jews. Moreover, an excerpt concerning Jesus from

Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:63 (ca. A.D. 93) seems to preclude the possibility of a Jewish conspiracy: “And the tribe of the Christians, so named from [Christ], are not extinct at this day.”¹⁷ If Jesus was a covert agent of revolt for the Jews, a feigned enemy, why was there still a distinct following of Christians 60 years after the crucifixion – 60 years after Rome swallowed the “bait?”

Second, it is exceedingly clear from the Gospel account that Jesus’ “new ideals” were not new at all. Rather, the moral instruction of Christ was, by his own acknowledgement in the Gospel of Matthew, not his own, but that of another: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”¹⁸ “The Law” and “the Prophets” are portions of the *Hebrew Tanakh* (i.e. Hebrew Bible), which even the most liberal scholar would admit could not have been written any later than the 2nd century B.C. – that is, unequivocally, before the Roman occupation of Judea even began – hardly “new.” Further, comparison between the teachings of Christ and that of the *Tanakh* bear out the truth of his assent to them. When asked in the Gospel of Matthew (by the Pharisees and Sadducees) which was the greatest of the commandments, Jesus responded famously, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹⁹ The first commandment is found

15. S.B. Luce, “Professor Carter’s Lowell Lectures on the Religious Life of the Romans,” *The Classical Journal* 7, no. 2 (1911), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3287190> (accessed February 28, 2009).

16. Nietzsche, 52.

17. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, quoted in Pappas, 134.

18. Mt. 5:17 (New American Standard Bible).

19. Mt. 22:37-39 NASB.



verbatim in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second in Leviticus 19:18, both books of the Torah which antedate Christ by hundreds of years. Even the Christian virtue of humility in the Beatitudes, which Nietzsche alludes to, is commended in Psalm 37:11: "But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity."²⁰ Moreover, the putative ethic of the twelve tribes of Israel – to which Nietzsche apparently subscribes – is one of ingroup loyalty and outgroup hostility. Whereas, Moses records the following command of God in Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong... The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you..."²¹ With regard to "evil," Jesus says, in Mark's Gospel, "[O]ut of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly."²² This is supposedly the thrust of the "slave morality," yet it is a reiteration of the pre-existing value system of the Levitical Covenant.

Third, any Roman acceptance of the gospel was largely irrespective of the Jews; scrutiny of Roman history reveals the untenability of any other conclusion. As Pappas points out:

There is Suetonius (in *Life of Claudius*) in the second century mentioning a 'Chrestus' who stirred up the Jews... : "if he means 'Christos' he is lumping Jews and Christians together. A generation later

Galen occasionally criticizes Christianity, likewise speaking without differentiation of the 'followers of Moses and Christ'... The purported enmity between the religions could hardly be stirring Romans who did not even notice it."²³

After Galen and until the signing of the Edict of Milan by Constantine I, Roman sentiments toward Christianity only become more hostile.²⁴

In holding the *Genealogy* accountable for solidarity with history, we must not neglect its plausibility in a less literal sense - we might engage it with a symbolical hermeneutic. However, we find immediately that Nietzsche himself will not let us do so. His examples throughout the book are consistently historical, complete with etymological support. Why else would he praise Napoleon as "the last signpost" to the master race?²⁵ However tempting it may be to engage the *Genealogy* symbolically, it is clear that Nietzsche purports to deliver *the* genealogy of morality.

Even if we could take Nietzsche less than literally, where are the masters we now resent? How does the ascetic ideal, such an anti-human perversion, perpetuate in the face of human nature and instinct? The gap between the slave revolt and modernity is left unexplored. We may well charge Nietzsche as he charged the "English" psychologists concerning their theory of the unegoistic action forgotten – for deficit of

20. Ps. 37:11 NASB.

21. Lv. 19:33-34 NASB.

22. Mk. 7:20-22 NASB.

23. Pappas, 134.

24. Luce.

25. *On the Genealogy of Morals* I 16.

26. *On the Genealogy of Morals* I 2.

explication.²⁶ Other questions abound. Could the weaker caste really overcome the stronger? As Pappas remarks, “How does weakness triumph and still deserve the name?”²⁷ Are we really to “wed to bad conscience the *unnatural* inclinations,” i.e., to turn the self-effacing faculty of the bad conscience against the slave sickness, as Nietzsche suggests?²⁸ These are speculative and compelling questions which deserve greater attention than the scope and intent of this effort allow.

Objections Addressed

I now pause to address several foreseeable objections which may be made to either the premise of this effort or the arguments therein. The reader’s initial reaction to arguments against the satiety of the Judeo-Roman context may well be that there are other historical contexts to consider. This is true; I would only submit that Nietzsche gives none which is not contingent upon the Jewish revolt. Ignoring more speculative concerns about the genealogy and as a matter of objective history, the slave revolt is, without context, left “explicable, merely *not yet explicated*.”²⁹ A corollary objection of the first could entertain the view that the slave revolt neither needs nor desires a definitive context, that its consummation is covert and gradual rather than so forcefully abrupt, and, consequently, that, given Nietzsche’s style, the Jewish conspiracy is appropriately metaphorical or symbolic. But it is certain that Nietzsche does not contextualize the slave

revolt in this manner. Moreover, it is in this case which Nietzsche’s causal explanations, already strained, defy near-insurmountable odds. As Pappas writes, “The cause cannot work, or stands in need of a cause itself.”³⁰ Specifically, a protracted understanding of the revolt denies it the paradigm-shifting dynamic, which is perhaps its single virtue to Nietzsche (it lends humanity greater depth and makes it more “interesting”). From the sociodynamic lexicon, the slave revolt never reaches “critical mass,” too anemic and unequipped for ascendance to power. Roughly speaking, the revolt is never galvanized; there is no nexus between *ressentiment* and revolution.

It might also be said that I take the gospel account too literally, ignoring the possibility that it could have been seriously manipulated by the Early Church to conceal elements of Jewish conspiracy. However, I wager no more on the gospel account than Nietzsche himself – I think that is evident. That the evangelists could have written whatever they liked concerning the life and instruction of Jesus is almost a truism. Notwithstanding, that instruction as recorded in the gospels derives from a Mosaic Law which predates any possible Judeo-Roman *slave revolt*. Of this tension between assent to the historicity of the *Gospel* and denial of its invested theology, Pappas notes, “[Nietzsche] needs the Gospel of John to exist so that the astonishment of the *Genealogy* may shine forth. But he also needs it not too exist so that his thoughts can have the spontaneity and independence he prizes so highly.”³¹

27. Pappas, 132.

28. *On the Genealogy of Morals* II 24. 29. Pappas, 134.

30. Pappas, xii.

31. Pappas, xiii.



There is one fourth and final objection which deserves consideration especially as a matter of thesis defense. That is, it challenges the premise of this effort and calls for the natural conclusion of the argument. Namely, the evaluation of Nietzsche's positive ethic does not involve his moral-historical genealogy. On the contrary, the evidence against this objection is twofold. First, Nietzsche denies this himself:

I end up with three question marks; that seems plain. 'What are you really doing, erecting an ideal or knocking one down?' I may perhaps be asked. But have you ever asked yourselves sufficiently how much the erection of every ideal on earth has cost? How much reality has had to be misunderstood and slandered, how many lies have had to be sanctified, how many consciences disturbed, how much 'God' sacrificed every time? If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed: that is the law – let anyone who can show me a case in which this is not fulfilled.³²

Here, it seems, Nietzsche emphasizes that the destruction of an ideal is necessarily antecedent to the "erection" of another, as if to say that by sabotaging the herd mentality – by revealing the lies and slander it sanctified and the perversion it promulgated – he has cleared the way for his positive ethical vision. Second, there is substance in the question, "how does Nietzsche's genealogy inform his positive

ethic, informally, things as they should be?" In his critique of modern morality, Nietzsche expresses particular disdain for its infringement on his "higher men," a patrilineage which finds its distinctive source in the genealogy.³³ If the genealogy is defunct, is it conceivable that the slave mentality is less a subversion of human nature than Nietzsche would have us think and more a consequence of it? If this takes the argument too far, there remains at least worthy consideration in the possibility that the higher mentality was never overcome by the lower but that it fell extinct autonomously from the human psychological genome. This, in turn, begs the question, "Can it even be revived?"

It is beyond the scope of this effort to consider in detail what all of this means for Nietzsche's moral – rather *anti-moral* – reasoning. I can say, however, as a consequence of the evidence detailed herein, that any assent to a neo-Nietzschean ethic must be set aside until a historical context can be found or it can be convincingly shown that there is no necessary connection between his anti-morality and any putative historical account which justifies it. What is Nietzsche without his genealogy? Certainly, the *Genealogy* remains an astonishing and monumental development in the history of moral philosophy. I have endeavored not to dismiss it, but, by challenging it, to add some small contribution to the field and perhaps encourage further investigation of Nietzsche's work. ♦

32. *On Morals of Genealogy* II 24.

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966).

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