

## Nietzsche, Genealogy, and the Value of Morality

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As Darwin notes, one essential element of a naturalistic account of the mind is a naturalistic account of morality.<sup>1</sup> The essence of such an account of the mind is an explanation of how the mind came to be, and came to be what it is, in terms of resources already present in nature, and without appeal to any supposed supernatural source. By analogy, a naturalistic account of morality aims to explain how morality came to be, and came to be what it is, in terms of resources already present in nature. “Nature” in the relevant sense will have to include, at any stage, the given of human nature, human psychology and human culture. Call an explanation of this kind a genealogy.

Darwin was optimistic that such a naturalistic account of morality could be given, and he thought that the origins of what we now know as morality are to be found in the social instincts of animals. These, along with the development of intellectual powers, experience, habit, and sympathy, are supposed to explain why we feel as we do towards others, and reliably render a number of services for them. The social instincts can therefore account for what seems otherwise mysterious, namely how animals and humans can come to be willing to sacrifice some of their own good, sometimes their own lives, for the benefit of others. The mechanism that explains this, Darwin claimed, is natural selection. An instinct to aid others of the same group would be reinforced by group selection. The groups in which instincts like these prevail will be more likely to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, esp. chs. 3-5.

survive and to rear offspring than competing groups that are divided and disrupted by persistent selfish action. But if the more cohesive group is more likely to rear offspring, then given that the social instincts really are instincts, that offspring will be likely to inherit these instincts. Morality developed on the basis of such altruistic dispositions, as human nature and culture evolved. In the course of human evolution, social instincts were transformed, extended and refined.

It is well known that Nietzsche was highly critical of this kind of genealogy. He did not accept its claims about the biological foundation of morality, and he thought that any genealogy that appeals primarily to social utility was false, both historically and psychologically. Any such account, Nietzsche suggested, leaves out the most significant historical developments and motives that first drove the development of moral institutions, and in disguise, continue to drive them today.

It is also well known that Nietzsche was highly critical of morality itself. He set out to question what he called the value of moral values, and he suggested, however vaguely, an alternative vision of the good and admirable life for individuals who are exceptional and gifted, and have learned to overcome the “moral prejudices” in favour of the outlook and the life of a “free spirit”. If morality is in the way of such “free spirits”, morality must make way for them.

It is also clear that Nietzsche thought that genealogy and ethical enquiry were intertwined. It is much less clear, by contrast, what their connection is and how Nietzsche conceived of that connection. How are we to construe the link between a naturalistic account of how morality came to be, and came to be what it is now, on the one hand, and a critique of morality on the other? A genealogy answers, in the first instance, to questions of fact. A critique of morality and an alternative ethical vision answer, in the

first instance, to questions of value. How could Nietzsche hope to support his critique of morality by employing the genealogical method, and to what extent did he succeed?

In order to answer these questions, we do well to take a look at the criticisms that Nietzsche directed against the very different, and essentially Darwinian, genealogy put forward by his former friend Paul Rée. Despite the fact that Nietzsche treats him condescendingly, and in fact just like a stranger, in his *Genealogy*; he knew Rée and his work extremely well. Indeed, Nietzsche had by no means always been as critical of Rée as he made it appear after their friendship had ended. Following an invitation by Malwida von Meysenbug, both had spent the winter months of 1876-7 in Sorrento and discussed their philosophical ideas. The result of this collaboration and exchange were Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, published in 1878, and Rée's *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* from 1877.

## 1. Nietzsche and Rée

For Nietzsche, Rée became the prime exponent of what he referred to as the “English kind” of genealogy.<sup>2</sup> The hallmark of this kind of genealogy is an explanation of morality on the basis of the egoistic and the altruistic dispositions found in human beings. According to Rée, every person “combines two drives within himself, namely, the egoistic drive and the non-egoistic drive”.<sup>3</sup> This makes his genealogy naturalistic in a quite straightforward sense. Indeed, Rée goes so far as to suggest, in the introduction to the *Origin*, that any reader who does not accept the theory of evolution as set out by Darwin

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (henceforth cited as GM), Preface, § 4; see also Preface, § 7, and First essay, §§ 1-3. All translations from Nietzsche are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Rée, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, ch. 1, p. 89.

and Lamarck need not bother to read any further.<sup>4</sup> Even Kant, Rée claims, still “saw in moral consciousness something transcendent”; yet “today, since Lamarck and Darwin have written, moral phenomena can be traced back to natural causes just as much as physical phenomena: moral man stands no closer to the intelligible world than physical man”.<sup>5</sup>

This is optimistic, to say the least, but something in it rings true. The basic idea is that human beings are selfish, and much more selfish than they tend to believe, but that they also have a set of social instincts. These instincts are already found in the animal kingdom, from which humans descended, and they were continually reinforced by natural selection. Morality, as based on social instincts, serves to protect and to promote the common good. Given that this still describes the proper purpose of morality, this “English” kind of genealogy naturally fits a utilitarian outlook.

Rée also insists, however, that our social instincts do not by themselves explain the moral concepts that we use, or the moral views that we hold. This is a point at which his view differs at least in emphasis from that of Darwin, and becomes interesting in its own right. Rée thinks that our notions of blame and moral responsibility presuppose an erroneous belief in free will, and that our moral beliefs reveal a deep but deceptive commitment to the idea of intrinsic value. Given that morality originally served to secure and to advance the common good, and given that it still serves precisely that purpose, there is a question of how we have moved from seeing morality as merely of instrumental value to seeing it as having intrinsic value instead. With respect to this question, Rée takes a broadly empiricist view. He appeals to the association of the ideas of morality and

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<sup>4</sup> Rée, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, Introduction, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

intrinsic value, forged by habit, repeatedly reinforced by education, but ultimately based on past and long forgotten knowledge of utility.

Nietzsche rightly criticizes this view of morality and its genealogy as too simplistic. His arguments for that conclusion, however, are somewhat peculiar, given what Nietzsche himself goes on to say. He objects to Rée on three fundamental counts.

First, he thinks there is no evidence for the claims that Rée advances; thus, he charges him with “English hypothesis-mongering *into the blue*”.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Nietzsche claims, we should pay attention to what is “grey”, that is to say, to what can actually be documented and confirmed.<sup>7</sup>

Second, he thinks that there is a reason why we have no evidence for these hypotheses, namely that they simply fail as historical explanations. Accordingly, Nietzsche charges “these English psychologists” with a lack of historical sense. He tries to show that their benign genealogy is, as a matter of fact, quite mistaken.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Nietzsche thinks that there is a plain inconsistency in the hypothesis, since it rests on the assumption that we forgot something which always was, and never ceased to be, entirely obvious, namely that morality is useful. Thus, he believes that the more coherent, if equally wrong, account of the idea of intrinsic goodness is that it “sums up” what was found to be useful, so that “being good” and “being useful” ultimately come to the same thing. Nietzsche cites Herbert Spencer as a proponent of this theory, according to which “good is what has always shown itself to be useful: so it can claim validity as ‘valuable in the highest degree’, as ‘valuable as such’”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> GM, Preface § 7.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> GM, First essay, §§ 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> GM, First essay, § 3.

## 2. Three Lines of Objection

The striking fact about these criticisms is that they apply with equal if not greater force to Nietzsche. His criticisms of Rée therefore tend to fall back on himself. There can hardly be any doubt that Nietzsche, too, speculates wildly “into the blue”. The evidence cited by Nietzsche for his claim that the forces that drove the development of moral thought and moral institutions were entirely different and much less benign is at best inconclusive, and in any case quite insufficient to support the kind of claim he makes. There is very little of the colour “grey” in the *Genealogy*.

Next, we must ask what independent reason we have to think that the genealogy proposed by Nietzsche is true, or more likely to be true, than its rival. The genealogy Nietzsche proposes to put in its place is familiar in outline, and I shall not dwell on it in detail. Nietzsche claims that far from being based on sympathy and the promotion of utility, morality is an invention by the resentful and weak, a majority that envies and suffers from those who have power. It systematically conceals its true motives and is the expression of an unacknowledged desire for power. It is cruel, it is harmful, and it stands in the way of a realization of human powers and greater achievements. In doing so, it satisfies fundamental drives of aggression that can no longer be outwardly discharged, and so are forced to turn in on themselves and stay inside. It even holds those captive who could free themselves from moral prejudices and illusions by suggesting to them that their suffering has meaning. In this way, morality induces and maintains the illusion of its own indispensability.

Is this view of the origin of moral thought and moral institutions credible? It is very difficult to say, and it is partly difficult to say because what Nietzsche says is often

not very clear, and does not add up to a convincing story. Undoubtedly, the story has some truth in it, and it is a good question just what it is. I think that truths are likely to be found at the psychological level. Nietzsche rightly reminds us of the complexities of human nature, of the obscurity of our own actions, feelings, and motivations. As a historical account, however, and as bound up with a claim that his is the only genealogy we should accept as true, or as most likely to be true, it carries no conviction. Measured by the standards Nietzsche sets himself for his account, it fails.

Finally, even if it were accepted that the story Nietzsche tells so far is true, it would lead to similar objections of reflective tension, at the limit, inconsistency. After all, it is obvious that Nietzsche thinks he is drawing something out into the light that had long been been forgotten, namely the origins of morality in *ressentiment* and a desire for power. It should be said that these motives are better hidden than the plain fact of utility, as they are likely to be if they are not, contrary to what Nietzsche argues, the motives that first drove and continue to drive moral feeling and moral action. But according to Nietzsche, that is what these motives did. If he is right about that, he owes us a good explanation of why these motives, the values to which they gave rise, and the earlier, “noble” values that were overturned, could have been forgotten. Nietzsche only hints at elements of such an explanation.

### **3. The Idea of A Critique of Moral Values**

The more intriguing question is, however, how Nietzsche expected his hypothesis to undermine morality. His book is entitled *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and its subtitle announces it as *A Polemic, “Eine Streitschrift”*, and that is certainly what it is. The narrative of genealogy is meant as a means, not as an end in its own right, in the course of ethical

enquiry. Even in the days of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes in 1887, hypothesises about the origin of morality, be they his own or those of others, concerned him “only for a purpose, to which they are one route among many”.<sup>10</sup> That purpose is to raise the question of the “value of morality”, to articulate “a new demand”. As Nietzsche puts it in the *Genealogy*: “we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values should, first of all, itself be questioned*”.<sup>11</sup> And for that, he continues, “it is necessary to know the conditions and circumstances from which they grew, under which they developed and shifted”.<sup>12</sup>

It can seem that there is an inconsistency in this approach. First, Nietzsche tells us that the method of genealogy is one means among many to call the value of moral values into question; then he tells us that the genealogical method is vital to the critique. This inconsistency, however, is merely apparent. What Nietzsche means is that there are many different ways of raising the question of the value of morality, and this is clearly correct. One might, for example, find inspiration in Nietzsche’s ethical vision, in history, or in great works of art. Such inspiration does not need to take a stance on the origins of moral thought and moral institutions. It could provide alternatives to traditional moral values, engender a different ethical vision, without even discussing the history of moral thought. Indeed, Nietzsche himself relies in his *Genealogy* on an alternative ethical vision. This is a vision in which “higher”, “noble” values are respected. Great men once again walk the earth, unthreatened by the assaults of the weak and resentful. Despite its vagueness and unclarity, this is an ethical vision, a vision of a better life for those who have the power and talent to live it. Morality, by contrast, is a “sickness”, an “inhibition”, a

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<sup>10</sup> GM, Preface, § 5.

<sup>11</sup> GM, Preface, § 6.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*



“poison”, something that does not support, but hinders the “*highest power and splendour* that is possible for the type “man” in itself.<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of the importance of that ethical vision, genealogy is vital to the particular critique that Nietzsche goes on to put forward, and thinks of as being put forward for the very first time. Not every critique of morality must use the genealogical method. This particular critique of it, however, does. How, then, are we to understand this critique? In what way, and to what extent, can the genealogy that Nietzsche goes on to present help to question and undermine moral values?

#### **4. What is the Strategy?**

The answer, I suggest, runs through the answer to a different question, namely that of Nietzsche’s audience: For whom did he write? Who was expected to read, to understand, and to put into practice the vision of his genealogy? It is often assumed that his genealogy, if accepted as true, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to stay committed to moral values. Accordingly, criticisms of Nietzsche have tended to focus on the question whether the genealogical story he tells is credible, and which parts of it may or may not be correct. I have already said something about this side of the question. It is important to remember that Nietzsche put forward his genealogical hypothesis with a claim to truth, or at least greater probability than the rival, “English” hypothesis. His attitude to Rée, he says, was not to refute him, “but, as befits a positive mind, to replace the improbable with the more probable, at times, perhaps, replacing one error with another”.<sup>14</sup> I also think, however, that too narrow a focus on the historical and

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<sup>13</sup> GM, Preface, § 6.

<sup>14</sup> GM, Preface, § 4.

psychological aspects of his genealogy tends to obscure what Nietzsche sets out to achieve. In any case, the question whether and to what extent the genealogy Nietzsche presents is true or false does not answer, but reinvents the question of how that genealogy, if it is true, could undermine morality.

When it is put in those terms, one might object to the whole undertaking. One might ask: How *could* claims about the history and psychology of morality, which are claims about *facts*, affect moral *values*? Would this not be a case of deriving an “ought” from an “is”? And would it not, at the very least, involve a genetic fallacy?

This would be a misunderstanding. A given moral outlook, we read in the *The Gay Science*, could even have arisen *from* an error; “this insight, too, would not even touch the problem of its value”.<sup>15</sup> In a fragment from the “Revaluation period”, 1885 or -86, he writes: “The question of the origin of our evaluations and tables of goods is not at all identical with their critique, as is so often believed: regardless of the fact that the insight into some pudenda origo carries with it a feeling of a diminishing of the value of the thing that originated in this way and prepares a critical mood and attitude towards it”.<sup>16</sup> Similar passages are found throughout the *Nachlaß* of that time. In fact, Nietzsche does not derive an “ought” from an “is” in any objectionable manner, and he does not commit the genetic fallacy. Instead, he explicitly warns aspiring genealogists against it.

Of course there is no question that our “innocent” conception of morality must change if we accept what Nietzsche says about its origin and nature. We would have to accept, for example, that morality is by no means radically separate from the impulses it portrays as dangerous and base, such as a desire for power, revenge, and brute instincts of violence and aggression. In particular, we would have to learn to accept that morality is

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 345.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-87*, 2 [189].

not opposed to these instincts and impulses in the way in which it pretends to be, but rather builds on them, transforms them, satisfies and conceals them. Still, we may ask how much of moral thought that insight would upset, and how disturbing for morality these facts could be. The answers to these questions, and others that arise in that connection, are not obvious.

So we must ask again: How *did* Nietzsche conceive of the connection between historical and psychological claims on the one hand, and moral claims on the other? I said that Nietzsche took genealogy as the means to an end, and that end is a critique of moral values. But how is that relation between means and ends to be understood?

## **5. Author and Audience**

The answer to the questions, I think, is in fact not to be found in an internal relation between genealogy and moral thought.<sup>17</sup> Rather, it is found in the anticipated effect on the minds of the reader. After all, Nietzsche constantly reminds us that he wishes to address the few, the gifted, those who understand, look closely, and have better ears for the significance of his words than the rest. In particular, he wishes to address those with potential to be noble, those inhibited aristocrats who can be brought to see through the illusions spun by the resentful. These, and only these, “higher” individuals can be brought to understand, when faced with moral prejudices, that this is precisely what they are. Given such an understanding, there is hope that they command the power to reject and overcome those prejudices. This would enable them to find a way to new and more free lives, appropriate for these “free spirits”, and appropriate to their “rank”. This life would be one where precisely that “highest power and splendour” available to man were

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect, I fully agree with the interpretation by Leiter; see B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, pp. 173-9.

realized - a life which is, at present, still impossible because it is suppressed and levelled by morality.

The genealogy, then, can work as follows. Given (1) that morality is a natural phenomenon that has no right to claims of objectivity, given (2) that it primarily serves the interests of the resentful and weak, and given (3) that in doing so, it harms those who could live differently, and conceals the life that is good for them from their own view, there is every reason to expect that once these secrets have been brought to light, the strong and independent will be in a position to see through the illusions spun by the resentful and weak, and realize that morality has no power to bind them.

This way of understanding Nietzsche, I believe, makes his criticism more forceful as it would otherwise be. His genealogy does not involve genetic fallacies, and it does not try to do the impossible by trying to unseat morality. Quite the contrary. It is of the very essence of the conception that it leaves the power that morality has over the weak where it was. Most people cannot do what the “free” and “higher” beings do. Therefore they will not, because they cannot, see through their illusions. Even if they could, they could not leave the moral life behind. Moreover, it is better that way, since the life of great achievement would not be so much as possible if morality were to collapse. If it did, the world would lapse into chaos. If there is any effect on the weak, it is, first of all, one of self-knowledge, as Nietzsche suggests at the outset in § 1; and secondly, there is an effect the powerful can only hope for, namely that the resentful and weak come to recognize higher powers and ranks, and exempt those who truly deserve it from expectations to which they themselves remain bound.

If this is the strategy, however, it makes the critique of moral values also more vulnerable, since it cannot hope to succeed unless those to whom the critique is

addressed share the alternative ethical vision. Only those who share that alternative ethical vision can see morality as something that needs to be overcome.

Should we share that alternative ethical vision? Much of it remains unclear, and much of it, insofar as it is clear, seems abhorrent. It is a most difficult question how Nietzsche conceived of his “higher man”, and what he says in his favour carries little conviction for us today.

## 6. Conclusion

What of genealogy? Moral sentiment remains something essentially complex, as Nietzsche notes, and this complexity is reflected in its history. In a passage from the *Nachlaß*, Nietzsche writes: “How multifarious is that which we experience as “*ethical emotion*”: in it, there is veneration, fear, the touch as of something sacred and secret, something that gives orders speaks in it, something that takes itself to be more important than we are; something that elevates, arouses, or makes calm and deep. Our ethical sentiment is a synthesis, a simultaneous sounding of all masterly and subservient emotions that have reigned in the history of our forbears”.<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche leaves us with the task of striking a balance, in writing our genealogy, between the “benign” side of human nature that Rée identified, and that Darwin placed at the centre of his naturalistic account of morality, on the one hand, and the “darker”, “hidden” elements that Nietzsche identified, and used as a basis for his critique, on the other. The story as told by Rée and Darwin leaves out something important, to which Nietzsche rightly draws our attention; the story as told by Nietzsche, however, is even more doubtful when it is made to bear the weight of explanation alone.

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<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, 1 [22].

The truth, no doubt, lies somewhere in the middle. The question is where; and that means we will have to continue for a while to try to “replace the improbable with the more probable, at times, perhaps, replacing one error with another”, as Nietzsche puts it. Given a clearer idea of genealogy, we will have to address the further and most important question whether and to what extent the genealogy that will emerge is consistent with our moral notions. Nietzsche taught us to be wary of all simple and obvious answers.

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