

Nietzsche: transvaluation of values and bad conscience

Transvaluation of Values

Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* is an enquiry into the ancestry and descent of morality. What Nietzsche refers to as a 'revaluation of values' is what follows from the enquiry and is demanded by it:

'[W]hat was at stake was the value of morality' (*GM*, Preface, 5).

'[L]et us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called into question*... One has taken the *value* of the 'values' as given, as factual and beyond all question (*GM*, Preface, 6).

Morality is always linked to one's position in society. What is designated as 'good' is relative to a person's standpoint.

Truth

Modern civilisation—suffering from an illness, infected by Christianity and nihilism. We should face up to the fact that Christian values are no longer credible.

Like Kierkegaard's work, Nietzsche's work stems from a theory of truth. Nietzsche believed that 'objectivity' prevented true understanding. The concepts that we use to describe and evaluate the world are imposed on the world from within ourselves.

Western beliefs systems, Nietzsche thought, were founded on metaphysical assumptions. His view has been called 'anti-foundational' – rejects the view that we should assume self-evident foundational truths. Science is the product of the Christian faith in the divine truth, in that it is the search for 'truth' that

underlies science. We should reject objectivity of facts; we should give up the idea that there are absolute truths.

Death of God (see *The Gay Science*, Sec 125).

Nietzsche voices a key feature of the modern era as demise in Christian faith. In spite of this demise, we still live in a Christian moral tradition. For Nietzsche, there are no moral facts or truths and this is revealed by the crisis within Christian tradition. A revaluation of values is needed if one is to overcome nihilism and create new values.

Two Distinct Moralities

The noble and slave morality, as well as moral concepts, have their origins in the hierarchal structure of society. The concept 'good' has its origins in "the good" themselves... the noble, powerful, high-stationed' (GM, I.2). It is out of feelings of difference from the lower ranks that the noble establish themselves as 'good'. That which is seen as low or common is, as an after thought, ascribed the word 'bad':

'It was out of this pathos of distance that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values' (GM, I.2).

Slave Morality

Slave morality—characterised by a spirit of resentment. Because of the impotence of those who are oppressed, there arises growing feelings of vengefulness towards those to whom they are opposed, those who they see as their enemies - i.e. the noble and powerful. We see a reversal of the values of the aristocratic in 'an act of the most spiritual revenge' (GM, I.7):

'[T]he wretched alone are the good; the poor, the impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God.... And you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel... accursed and damned!' (GM, I.7).

Christianity is linked to the ‘grand politics of revenge’ (GM, I.8).

Slave morality is a reactive force. Its will to power is negation. It says ‘no’ to what is different and outside of itself. The slave first calls the other ‘evil’ and then calls himself ‘good’ after the act of negation. This negation is its ‘creative deed’:

‘This inversion... this need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of resentment: in order to exist, slave morality first needs a hostile world’ (GM, I.10)

Master Morality

This is active and positive. Its will to power embodies affirmation. Its valuation starts with the positive affirmation of the self. It affirms itself as ‘good’ to the extent that activity, happiness, energy and affirmation are its attributes. After this affirmation the noble look at the oppressed and invent the concept ‘bad’ only to glorify themselves even more. The noble do not establish themselves as ‘good’ by first defining their opposite with the concept ‘bad’:

‘It seeks its opposite only so as to affirm itself more triumphantly – its negative concept ‘low’, ‘common’, ‘bad’ is only a subsequently invented pale, contrasting image in relation to its positive basic concept... ‘we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!’ (GM, I.10)

Bad Conscience

- The significance of humans’ ability to make promises — man as developing and emerging as a sovereign individual, with a sense of responsibility.
- The relevance of violence and punishment – disciplines man into being a moral creature.

- When we live in a fixed community, conscience emerges. Our conscience is, in this way, a product of our environment. The instincts we inherit have to be dealt with if we're to interact in a community with others.
- Bad conscience as an illness. The inhibiting of the drives and the '*internalization of man*' as the origin of bad conscience.
- Nietzsche characterizes the war we wage against our own instincts as 'man's suffering *of man, of himself*' (GM, II.16).

Will to Power

Nietzsche developed this concept from two main sources, Schopenhauer and the ancient Greeks. The impulse for all our acts could be traced back to this will.

Often it becomes transformed or perverted, but it is always there. Christianity, with its ideas of brotherly love and compassion, was a subtle perversion of the will to power. Christianity was a religion born out of the will to power of slaves rather than the more recognisable will to power of the powerful, pp.29-30).

Nietzsche preaches an overthrow of Christian values –we must take responsibility for our own actions in a godless world (Strathern, 2002, pp.29-32).

The Overman (Thus Spake Zarathustra)

A new being of superior character. This 'superman' will live free from error of belief in some transcendental reality and free from the 'herd morality'. Overmen will be artistic creators of themselves.

The Myth of the Eternal Return (The Gay Science, Sec. 260)

Imagine we are condemned to live this painful and frustrating life over and over again, an infinite number of times. Once we know that our choices and acts are endlessly repeated then presumably we will think carefully the choices we make.

The Overman and the Eternal Return – are these remedies against nihilistic despair?

References

- *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings* (NY: Modern Library, 1968).
- *The Gay Science*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale, in *Nietzsche Reader* (London: Penguin, 1977).
- Paul Strathern, *The Essential Nietzsche*, The Philosophers Series (London: Virgin Books, 2002).

Reading

Essential

- *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings* (NY: Modern Library, 1968). Feel free to use any edition. Read the Preface and the First Essay. *On the Genealogy of Morals* is easily accessible on the internet. Read the Preface, Sections 5-7, and First Essay, sections 1- 10.

Recommended

- Maudemarie Clark. (2023). Nietzsche's Immoralism and the Concept of Morality. In *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (1st ed., pp. 15-). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2711657.8>

Further

- Osborn, Ronald E., 'Naturalism and Nihilism', *Humanism and the Death of God: Searching for the Good After Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche* (Oxford, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 Jan. 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198792482.003.0001>, accessed 3 May 2024.
- H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1952), ch. 2. (Hard copy only but an excellent resource.)