

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* – Preface & Essay One

(Revised: 5 February 2002)

Notes by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use / Please do not cite in any publication.

protevi@lsu.edu / <http://www.protevi.com/john/Foucault/PDF/GOM1.pdf>

PREFACE

1. Theme of self-knowledge and its difficulties

2. N is writing a polemic on the origin [*Herkunft*] of moral prejudices. His first thoughts are found in *Human, All-Too-Human* [where he shows that actions that some attribute to divinely inspired moral commands are explicable by naturalistic hypotheses]. N mentions his will to knowledge that lies at the root of his thoughts.

3. N's early theological writings on origin [*Ursprung*] of good and evil evolve due to his desire to look for worldly explanations of morals: historical, philological and psychological taste lead him to these questions about moral judgments: a) their conditions; b) their value [*Werth*]. Concerning value for life: are they signs of distress or of plenitude and force? [Here we see a real key: the diagnosis or interpretation of moral judgments as signs of a type of life. N as physiologist.]

4. N's antipathy to Rée's book and references to other N works.

5. Return to the question of the value of morality as superior to hypotheses about origin [*Ursprung*]. Relation to Schopenhauer and the value of pity. [Excellent article by Martha Nussbaum in Schacht volume on "N's Stoicism": pity as harmful both to subject and object: the pitier assumes worldly goods are worth worrying about; this increases fear of loss and desire for revenge when they are taken away. The pitied is assumed also to be concerned about these things and to be unable to overcome their loss and still maintain flourishing. Nussbaum accuses N of "bourgeois" toughness: he can overcome loneliness and alienation while living on a pension in various resorts, but cannot appreciate the way real deprivation destroys the physical basis for flourishing. You can display spiritual toughness by thinking despite a migraine, but one simply cannot overcome the limited brain growth caused by chronic malnutrition, fatigue, and repetitive menial labor. Thus N isn't as good a physiologist as we are when we notice this.]

6. The problem of the value of pity leads to demand for a new critique, a critique of values of moral values, with regard to the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, evolved and changed. [Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* posits N as rewriting Kant's critiques. For Kant, critique set forth the universal and necessary conditions and limitations of rational knowledge, delimiting science, morality, and aesthetics/biology. {See also Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*.} Nietzsche wants to show the earthly conditions and value for life of the limited set of moral judgments previously occurring here on Earth]. N's motivating question: What if the highest power and splendor of man was held back by the triumph of morality?

7. N proposes an actual history of morality, which must be accomplished by genealogy, that is, attention to the documented moral judgments (but these are in need of interpretation) of mankind. Rée's hypotheses are those of a reader of Darwin: that is, a domesticated herd animal. [See Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life*, for the Nietzsche / Darwin connection.]

8. N and the art of reading.

ESSAY I: "GOOD AND EVIL," "GOOD AND BAD" [ON *RESSENTIMENT*]

1. The "English psychologists" [Locke and Hume] are the only other ones to attempt a naturalistic analysis of the origin of morality. What is their motivation in showing habit and association and other humble mechanisms at the basis of what others assume are the glories of human reason? Are these just displays of petty rancor toward the other-worlders? N hopes they are instead "fundamentally brave, proud, and magnanimous animals For such truths do exist." [Note the courage needed for self-knowledge as well as the plurality of truths: both strong Foucaultian themes.]

2. A) But their historical spirit is lacking. They make a fundamentally non-genealogical mistake. They take their own contemporary value judgments about the utility of actions to the recipient of the action and project them backwards to the alleged origin. History for them is then thought to be the smooth development of this essential kernel, with only minor changes in appearance: that is, one forgets the utility aspect of other-helpful acts and simply names the act good in itself. For N, this picture of essence / accident in history betrays the subject / property grammatical error that haunts metaphysics. [There are endless nuances to the history of metaphysics, but one of the closest matches to N's complaint might be found in the theory of "predicables" in A's *Topics*, where we see a subject with various types of predicates: some denote its *essence* {its *definition* and *genus*}, others *differentiate* it from others in its genus, some denote *necessary properties* {which do not define the subject, but nonetheless always accompany it as a *unique property*}, still others denote *accidental properties*. The relation of this doctrine to Aristotle's *Categories*, and in turn to the *Metaphysics* is more than enough to occupy a good scholar's career.] For N, becoming is fundamental: there is no essence that develops through changing appearances: there is only the changes.

B) N claims that the "good" ones, the noble ones, first applied the term to themselves. This self-naming is part of the overflowing fullness of their life and power: they seized the right to create values from the pathos of distance they felt separating themselves from the common herd. N stresses that the feeling of superiority is much too intense, much too hot, to have anything to do with the cool calculation of utility.

[N's physiology is accurate: it's not that utilitarian calculation is the absence of emotion: it's just that it requires a tepid emotion, a low-intensity body state. Cf. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*. Descartes made the mistake of thinking that a low-intensity body state, the "forgetting" and "proper digestion" N shows essential for consciousness and its illusion of being disembodied when it "touches" its object, for a real separation from the body.]

3. N's second objection to the English hypothesis: how can the forgetting of utility work? Spencer seems more likely (though not true): goodness simply means utility.

4. N's clue is the etymology of words, wherein he sees the same conceptual transformation: "noble" in the social / political sense becomes "good" in the moral sense, while "common" in the social sense becomes "bad" in the moral sense.

5. An important nuance in naming derived from the feeling of superiority: the names are often simply about power, but also about a character trait: the truthful. (The commoners are often the "cowards.")

N here gets into his race theory. Immense difficulties. The main question: does N consistently apply genealogical thinking in analyzing the production of strength and weakness in the conqueror (fair-haired) and suppressed (dark-haired) races? Or does he lapse into a reified metaphysical notion in which there is a subject endowed with the property "strength" or "weakness"?

Dan Conway of Penn State, one the leading contemporary interpreters of Nietzsche wrote the following in personal correspondence when I asked for his help in getting out of the quandry we had gotten into on the notion of race in Nietzsche:

N uses "race" in both a descriptive and prescriptive (honorific) sense. In the former sense, "race" is roughly equivalent to nation, people, etc. In the latter sense, "racehood" is earned over time, by

means of centuries or even millennia of sustained acculturation. The "races" that he praises are praised because they are self-fashioned and self-regulated. The model here is the "Greeks" of the tragic age, who comprise any number of ethnicities from the greater Mediterranean-Adriatic-Ionian region. In short, a "race" in the prescriptive sense is made, not born. As a consequence, the only meaningful sense of "racial purity" pertains not to "blood," but exclusively to the institutions of acculturation that are responsible for the self-fashioning of the race. To "breed" a race is to impose upon a loose aggregate of peoples, tribes, nations, etc. a single principle of order and organization. This is why N hates the anti-Semites, who believe that racehood can be earned and maintained merely by attending to one's mating partners (i.e., blood descent).

At the bottom of all this is some kind of quasi-physicalist ontology of forces. The role of the great leader or lawgiver is to impose order onto a chaotic welter of peoples and tribes.

The bottom line: For N, "race" is far closer to what we would call "culture" than to biological or genetic ancestry/destiny. "Blood" is a huge red herring, simply because after centuries of poor acculturation, even "blood" can be affected.

I replied to Dan:

We were indeed confusing "strength" as an individual predicate (or better the relation of a particular constellation of forces in what we call a human body), which would be susceptible to class analysis (monopoly of good diet and so forth) and the strength of a race as the intensity of self-formation, the organization of customs toward the goal of self-overcoming (i.e., what sends the Athenians all over the Aegean to build monuments to their good and awful deeds, as N quotes Pericles). In other words, confusing individual physiology with cultural politics. But in one sense the imposition of order on customs is backed up by individual physical force (culture is formed at the point of the sword), but it's important to keep the levels distinct in principle. The confusion of course comes from N using physiological language to discuss cultural politics. And behind all that too, as you rightfully point out, is the ontology of forces. I tend to follow the Deleuze line and think of that ontology as underlying both N and the Foucault of the *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality 1* period, (although with a complexity theory spin: power as ability to influence conditions of other people's actions = power as ability to pattern the phase space or in Deleuze terms to carve up the virtual realm).

6. A key materialist thesis: claims to the superiority of soul stem from claims to political superiority. When the politically superior class is the priestly class, then "purity of soul" at first simply meant "purity of bodily practice."

N here begins his examination of the "priests." They tend to be "unhealthy," which keeps them from action, forcing them into brooding and emotional explosions, which leads to "intestinal morbidity and neurasthenia." The priestly remedy for this [the ascetic ideal] has been terribly dangerous to mankind in fostering nihilism. But we can't forget that only the priests make man an interesting animal: only with them does the soul acquire depth.

7. N opposes the health of the warrior nobles and the sickness of the priests. Priests are dangerous because they are physically impotent, which makes them devious haters by blocking immediate reaction to slights. N here identifies the Jews as the "priestly people" par excellence.

[Yirmiyahu Yovel's article in the Schacht volume makes the following distinctions in N's evaluation of the Jews. N is filled with admiration for both the Old Testament and for contemporary European Jewry. The first for their grandeur; the second for their toughness and self-overcoming. They are the keys to the advancement of Europe. The "Jews" as priests are the Second Temple priests, those overcome by the Romans. It is this period of Jewish history, that feeds into [Pauline] Christianity [not Christ himself as a personal figure], that is N's target here.]

The Jewish priests concoct the most spiritual revenge: the revaluation of noble values. This is the slave revolt in morality. [NB: the priests lead this revolt and give shape to the dissatisfaction of the slaves. "Slavishness" in N means the spirit of revenge, not any mere political/economic condition.]

8. Jewish hatred is itself extremely powerful: it creates ideals and revalues values, giving birth to Christian love, the path to Jewish victory over Rome [cf. the Second Essay].

9. The monologue of the "free spirit."

10. The slave revolt in morality is the creativity of *ressentiment*. Noble morality is active and self-affirmative ["I am good, therefore {an afterthought} those others are bad"], while slave morality is reactive and other-negating ["The powerful others are evil, therefore I am good."]. [Here Deleuze is essential in distinguishing active and reactive. Even though priests are creative and powerful, they base themselves on the reactivity of the slaves.] *Ressentiment* is a matter of physiology: the active are those whose happiness is found when strength is manifested in action, while the reactive are those who need rest for happiness. *Ressentiment* breeds cleverness in the weak, while it is immediately consummated and extinguished in the strong. The nobles do not hold to "forgive and forget": rather the forget so quickly and thoroughly that they have no need to forgive. Thus the nobles can rever their enemies rather than hate them: they love a good opponent as the occasion to manifest their strength.

11. The nobles are kept in check inter pares, but when they "go outside" they are like beasts of prey, like "blond beasts," [Kaufmann is essential here in identifying the blond beast with the lion, not with the Aryan.] such as the Romans, Arabs, Germans, Japanese, Greeks, Vikings. [The felt superiority of the pathos of distance is a surplus of differential force that is discharged when in the presence of the weak: it is like a discharge across a membrane due to a difference in charge on either side.] The *Sinn* ["meaning" but also "direction" as in the vector of force] of culture is the reduction of the noble warrior beast to the tame man of society. Thus *ressentiment* is the instrument of culture, for it is through *ressentiment* and the priestly leadership of the slave revolt that revalues noble values that this taming has occurred. [The mass of weak individuals is stronger than the few strong ones.]

12. Interlude in which N expresses his disdain with the cultivated modern tame social being. [The problem of modernity and social production: what diets {Mintz, Schivelbusch}, what "structures of feeling" {Raymond Williams}, what disciplinary institutions {Foucault} are needed for co-operation?].

13. The "good" as conceived by the man of *ressentiment* is the "strong" man who does not act, who "freely chooses" not to act. This is based on a illusion: that there is a subject separate from action which is free to act or not act. For N, this is due to the "seduction of language" [the subject-predicate structure of Indo-European languages]. Thus the weak have taken their necessity of not acting and made it a virtue. "I could have done that, but I didn't want to, I chose not to." Hence the "truth" of the free subject is just the lie told for the self-preservation of the weak herd.

[Can we turn the tables on N with regard to reification, in this case, the "strength" of the "noble races"? Is "strength" itself blown up into a property of a subject, in this case, the "noble race"? If so, this mystifies the production of strength through diet and exercise, which are social practices restricted to the sons of the nobles, by attributing strength to some hereditary carrier like "blood." It could be that N falls into the typical philosophical trap of neglecting child-rearing practices. Plato sees precisely this problem of racializing strength and its concomitant nepotism in demanding communal child rearing in Book 5 of the *Republic*. A rigorous genealogical analysis of strength would point to its *production* in the conflict of forces.]

14. The glimpse into the workshop for the production of values.

15. The rewards for the Christian faithful in the afterlife.

16. The mark of the higher nature today: that the struggle of noble and slave systems of morality is an internal, spiritual struggle. [An important sentence to destroy any lingering doubts as to whether N

harbors any nostalgia for the days of the warriors.] Rome vs Judea. The Renaissance and the Reformation. The French Revolution. Napoleon. All seen as exemplifications of these types. The interpretive question: which force is stronger in these events? What type of life is exemplified?

17. N's note. Future studies of the history of morality will have to follow his lead in utilizing etymology, philosophy, physiology, and medicine in investigating the value of morality with regard to a) survival of greatest herd number; b) production of a stronger type.

[Ansell Pearson locates here a key point in the relation of N and Darwin: natural selection as elimination of difference by stressing adaptation versus a creative profusion of internal differentiation that merely uses the environment as a testing ground for its experimentation.]