

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* – Essay Three: “What do ascetic ideals mean?”

7 April 2010

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1. N presents a variety of meanings of the ascetic ideals (AI), each one for a different group. The key categories, all of which are treated in the 3rd essay, except for women: a) artists [sections 2-4]; b) scholars and philosophers [sections 5-9]; c) women; d) “physiological casualties” (the majority of people); e) priests ; f) saints. N ends this section with the famous line with which ends the 3rd essay: because the will needs an aim or target, man would rather will nothingness than not will. [Conway notes that N does not define AI here. He proposes the following: AI gives meaning to life to those who deny themselves physical pleasures by promising extra-worldly rewards; it degrades and poisons the enjoyment of physical pleasures.]
2. As an example of AI and artists, what did AI mean for Wagner’s late turn to chastity and rejection of sensuality? There need not be an antithesis btw chastity and sensuality; even when there is, it can be a charm to life to negotiate this balancing act, but only for “the best and brightest.” With “pigs that have fallen on hard times,” who are made to praise chastity, they will only praise it as the opposite of themselves. It’s this opposition that Wagner stages at the end of his life. Why?
3. It would have been better if Parsifal had been a joke, a comic satyr play in which Wagner takes leave of tragedy by producing an exaggerated parody of the tragic. That would have been evidence of Wagner’s strength: his ability to laugh at himself. If we see Parsifal as straightforward, it’s just evidence of Wagner cancelling himself as an artist who once wanted his art to be “the highest intellectualization and sensualization [*höchste Vergeistigung und Versinnlichung*].” The young Wagner followed Feuerbach’s dictum of “healthy sensuality”; the late Wagner seems to have renounced it all and turned to ascetic Christianity.
4. A truly aesthetic outlook must renounce physiological inquiry into the artist if it is to enjoy the work of art. But N, as “physiologist and vivisectionist of the soul” must continue on that path. Artists often consider themselves identical to their creations, but this is false: they are always different from them, and that difference is the condition of creation.
5. But artists aren’t that interesting in this investigation; they are never independent, but always just the “valets of a morality or a philosophy or religion.” So we need to move from Wagner to Schopenhauer, on whom W relied, lacking the courage to himself develop an ascetic ideal like the one S developed. So a better question is: what does it mean when a real philosopher like S pays homage to the AI? First, let’s look at S on art, which is what first attracted W to

him, and caused him to change his view of music, from a means that needed a goal (drama) to flourish, to a sovereign form of art, the independent form of art, that speaks the language of the will in direct revelation. Now the musician seems a “sort of mouthpiece of the ‘in itself’ of things, a sort of telephone to the beyond ... ventriloquist of God” talking metaphysics.

6. Schopenhauer departs from Kant, who sees the aesthetic problem of beauty from the perspective of the spectator rather than from that of the creative artist. But that leads to the mistake of conceiving the beautiful as that which gives pleasure w/o interest. [Stendahl, on the contrary, called beauty the promise of happiness, as expectation of satisfaction of interest / desire.] Now Schopenhauer could never break free of Kant’s standpoint: for S, aesthetic contemplation counteracts sexual interest: it’s an escape from the will [desire as lack that can only temporarily be sated before beginning anew]. So really, S’s interest in art is the interest in being released from the torment of his intense sexual desires. Generalizing from S’s case, we see that philosophers turn to AI as a means of freeing oneself from torture.
7. Don’t feel sorry for the perpetually angry Schopenhauer: his anger at “Hegel, women, sensuality” is what kept him from pessimistic suicide, kept him interested in life. S is just an extreme case of two characteristics of philosophers: a dislike for sensuality and an adherence to AI. Here N gives a key statement of will-to-power as biological principle: “every animal ... instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions in which to fully release his power and achieve his maximum of power-sensation [*Machtgefühl*].” And every animal “abhors” that which blocks this path; thus every philosopher abhors marriage as blocking his independence. Hence the philosopher’s predilection for the AI as the “optimum condition of the highest and boldest intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*].” So the AI for a philosopher is not the denial of existence in general, but the affirmation of his existence in particular. [Conway emphasizes that for N, the philosopher instinctively embraces the AI as an instrument to their own enhanced spiritual power, but this means they might make the conceptual mistake of endorsing the AI in itself.]
8. On to a portrait of the philosopher using the AI to achieve the best conditions for spiritual power. Three principles are at stake: poverty, humility, chastity. This section is often seen as a flattering self-portrait of Nietzsche himself, especially the line about “a room in a crowded, run-of-the-mill hotel.” What’s important is the notion of self-directed asceticism as condition of spiritual productivity.
9. Philosophy needed the AI to begin, for philosophical drives and virtues were contrary to morality and conscience for a long time, insofar as they are expressions of strength rather than weakness. Our contemporary life is one of hubris toward nature, God, even ourselves; indeed “all good things [as judged today] used to be bad things at one time; every original sin has turned into an original virtue.” For instance, marriage (as one man’s monopoly of a woman); gentle, sympathetic feelings; submission to law: all these were violations of the “morality of custom,” which is the “decisive main historical period that determined man’s character.” During the morality of custom, suffering, cruelty, deceit, revenge, denial of

reason were all virtues; well-being, curiosity, peace, compassion were all dangers; being pitied and work were disgraceful; madness was godlessness; and change was unethical and ruinous. [Conway: now that the philosophical virtues are respectable, has philosophy outgrown its dependence on the AI? See the coda to section 10.]

10. Contemplative men aroused suspicion during the long pre-history of the morality of custom; to survive, they had to arouse fear in others, and even in themselves. Their tool was that cultivation of self-mortification, through which they could violate tradition and form new practices. So philosophers as contemplatives have had to hide among the already established contemplatives – the priests, magicians, soothsayers. So the AI was the disguise for philosophers under the desperate conditions of their long pre-history. Can the philosophical butterfly now emerge from the loathsome caterpillar of the ascetic priest?
11. We can tackle the main problem of the meaning of the AI now that we have encountered the ascetic priest (AP). We'll have to help him mount a defense of the AI, as he obviously lacks objectivity here. So what is the valuation of earthly, sensual, power-striving life by the AP? They degrade it as only a bridge to another existence, as a wrong path, or a mistake. The negative valuation of life by the AP is very common in human history; the AP “does not belong to any race in particular; he thrives everywhere, he comes from every social class.” N then develops a key concept: “life itself must have an interest in preserving such a self-contradictory type” as the life-hating form of life that is the AP. An ascetic life is self-contradictory: it is a life in which *ressentiment* rules, in which will-to-power pushes for a mastery over life, rather than over something; paradoxically, power seeks to block the [biological, physiological] sources of power; power targets the manifestation of physiological power in growth, beauty, joy, and finds satisfaction in failure, decay, pain, etc. The paradox is that ascetic power grows as the condition, life, decreases [IOW, you have to be alive in order to hate life].
12. A philosophical embodiment of ascetic self-contradictory life would look to deny what is most real and truthful: sensuality and one's ego, one's reality. [We have to be careful here, as N upholds a “society of the self” thesis: there's always a multiplicity of drives at work and our experience of a unified self is only that of the triumphant drive.] We even see reason turned against itself, in the positing of an inaccessible realm of the in-itself. But we shouldn't be ungrateful for this ascetic training of the spirit that develops the desire to see differently, for that is the condition for future “objectivity.” This is not the “view from nowhere” but the ability to play multiple interpretations off against each other; the more angles we can see from, “the more affects we can put into words,” the better our “concept” or “objectivity” will be. [Bringing affect and cognition together like this is a very hot topic today in the “embodied mind” school of thought.]
13. But in reality, a self-contradiction like “life against life” makes no psychological or even physiological sense: it's only a shorthand that indicates previous ignorance. N knows the real cause; the AI “springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life.” The AI doesn't ultimately aim at death, but at the preservation of a form of life: the sickly human.

The AP puts himself at the head of the flock of sick humans and lets them maintain their hold on [earthly] life [by making their suffering meaningful as preparation for rewards in the after-life]. What is the source of the sickness? The futurity of man, his experimentation, his courage and richness: how could such an uncanny animal not be sick?

14. N delivers an inspired rant at the way the sick have made the healthy feel ashamed for being healthy. This is the will-to-power of the weak, to tyrannize the healthy. The worst of these physiological casualties, eaten alive by their own resentment, are the anti-Semites. But this is all topsy-turvy: the healthy should be kept separate from the sick so that the healthy can prepare man's future. Otherwise, blending nausea and pity / compassion only risks nihilism.
15. The AP, as a sick physician to sick people, has an historic mission as the defender of the herd. He is in fact a more deadly predator, because of his cleverness, than the merely physically strong warriors. Now in protecting the herd, he must manage the herd's *resentiment*; he can't let them envy the healthy, for he must despise, delicately, all direct expressions of strength such as those displayed by the healthy. To prevent a dangerous explosion of *resentiment* [revolution], the AP changes the direction of *resentiment*. Now all sick suffering people seek someone to blame for their suffering, because such blaming, as a powerful emotion, anesthetizes pain; this anesthetizing is the "physiological causation of *resentiment*." The amazing trick of the AP is to convince the sick herd that they themselves are the cause of their suffering; they are the ones to blame.
16. So guilt, sin, etc are attempts to make the sick harmless, to turn their *resentiment* back on themselves; for the less ill among them, this is "for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-overcoming." Now this can't be a real physiological cure, but it did at least organize the sick (in "churches") and keep them separate from the healthy for a long time. Now sin is not a fact, but an interpretation of the fact of physiological upset. N proposes a physiological reduction of psychological suffering, in the sense that strong people digest their experiences while weak people suffer from indigestion (i.e., *resentiment*). But N is still an opponent of "materialism" [for N, that = "mechanism" and is wrong bcs it denies will-to-power as universal metaphysical / ontological principle, even in inorganic "matter"].
17. The AP treats only symptoms (pain) rather than causes (weakness, sickness). He uses emotions to combat the depression, fatigue, and melancholy of the sick. He's a psychologist trying to cure a physiological problem, which might be caused by mixing races or social classes, by unsound emigration, by bad diet, by disease. So the AP must fight lethargy. N then details the methods and forms of this fight. The first method is to reduce awareness of life to its lowest point: no more desire, no emotions. This hypnotizes man, like hibernation; this can result in conquering depression, and often in spiritual visions / hallucinations, and even in "salvation" as "state of total hypnosis and silence." The false "spiritual" / ascetic interpretations of the religious are to be noted, but at root the methods of the AP are, unwittingly, interesting though superficial experiments ("hypnosis"), although the emphasis on "deep sleep" and release from suffering reveals the desperate sickness being combated.

18. More common than the use of “hypnosis” in fighting depression are two methods. The first method is the use of repetitive work, “mechanical activity,” which distracts the sufferer from his pain. Giving meaning to the work they have to do anyway succeeds with slaves, whose discontent was not invented by priests, even though priests take them in hand, organize them, and offer them “cures.” Another method is a small dose of pleasure, frequently the pleasure of giving pleasure to others by helping them; this is an arousal, in small doses, of life-affirming will-to-power by allowing the helper to feel superior to the helped. We see this in the mutual aid societies of early Roman Christianity; this testifies to the formation of a herd as a manifestation of will-to-power and a victory over depression. Belonging to a herd can free a sick person from his dissatisfaction with himself; the AP senses this desire and promotes it; “the instinct of weakness has willed the herd and the cleverness of the priest has organized it.” The strong seek to be apart just as the weak seek to be together; a group of the strong is in view of collective expression of will-to-power and is against the conscience of the individuals; a herd, on the other hand, forms for the pleasure of togetherness. Associations of nobles are unstable due to the solitary nature of the individuals; every oligarchy is threatened by desire for tyranny.
19. Besides these “innocent” means of fighting depression, the AP has other, “guilty” means, involving an excess of feeling, which is a great anesthetic. This is incomprehensible to moralized ears, but Nietzschean psychologists will need to resist moralization to undertake effective genealogies. The problem with modern moralists is their innocence, not so much their lies. In the future, this 19th C innocence will be used as an emetic! It’s N who will have the courage to utter a few truths about man.
20. Back to the issue at hand: the AI used to produce an excess of feeling as a means of freeing man from depression. Now this just makes the sick even sicker, but remember that the AP is not a physiologically adept physician; he’s just trying to keep humanity from a mass suicide. The main tool of the AP is the feeling of guilt; in Essay 2 we found the bad conscience (cruelty turned on the self when it’s impossible to release outward due to social life); now we realize that’s only the raw material for the AP as artist, who turned animal bad conscience into guilt over sin. The AP taught man that he was to blame for his own suffering because he was a guilty sinner; his suffering was punishment for his sin. In this way depression is overcome and life became interesting again: the guilty sufferers cried out for more ways to suffer.
21. The cost of the AP’s prescription of the AI as antidote to depression has been very high. It has tamed the healthy man, while it has made the sick even sicker. Plus, the sickness of guilt is virulent; it spreads widely and quickly. It provokes “shattered nervous systems,” epidemics of “epilepsy” like St Vitus’s Dance; depressive towns; witch hunts; sleep walking; death worship. It has been a disaster for the health of Europeans. [Conway: the spread of the sickness of guilt is the priests’ weapon against the nobles.]

22. The AP has also ruined literary taste; witness the New Testament. Leaving aside classical Greco-Roman antiquity, it can't even compare to the Old Testament, which has "great men, heroic landscape ... strong heart; ... a people."
23. N can't keep listing the effects of the AI, for they are endless. Instead, we are after the meaning of the AI. It aims at denigrating this world in favor the after-life, but what is the counterpart to the AI? What has affirmation of this world as its goal? Is it modern science? Well, it's atheistic at least, but in fact, it is only the latest manifestation of the AI! In fact, don't we see all sorts of workaholic, self-anesthetizing scientists?
24. Even with the idealist philosophers and scholars we still see evidence of a lingering domination by the AI. They are not really free spirits, because they still believe in truth as affectless "objectivity" (compare 3.12 on multiple affects). These idealists still have faith in a metaphysical value of presuppositionless "objective" truth. Even today's atheist scientists are closet Platonists in their belief in the divinity, the other-worldliness, the "objectivity" of truth. What N proposes is something new: posing the problem of the value of truth, a critique of the will-to-truth.
25. No, science is not the place to find new values; only philosophy posits new values. [Conway: perhaps N is after a new science freed from the AI and subservient to a philosophical positing of values after the critique of the value of truth.] Contemporary atheistic science only denies the outward theological trappings of the AI; it's related closely to the AI by its shared overestimation of truth as immune to critique or evaluation. In fact, art, as fundamentally illusion is more opposed to the AI than science is, so when art supports the AI it is in fact artistic corruption. Physiologically, science rests on the same impoverishment of life as the AI; witness the solemnity and decadence of scholarly epochs. In fact, the anti-theological naturalization of man via science, his being rendered an animal [Darwin] lost in the stars [astronomy], all this points to the self-contempt of man characteristic of the AI. Kant is a great clue: he frees the transcendental God [as postulate of practical reason] as soon as he outlaws the metaphysical God.
26. Modern scientific historiography is no better; it is ascetic too insofar as it appeals to a supposedly presuppositionless "objectivity." No, more than ascetic; it is nihilistic. But even worse are the "contemplative" historians of today such as Renan; even the vulgar anti-Semites like Dühring are preferable! At least the AI is honest and believes in itself! N continues with a rant against the desolation of the modern German spirit, caused by "an almost exclusive diet of newspapers, politics, beer and Wagnerian music."
27. N repeats his charges: modern science lacks a counter-ideal; its atheism binds it even stronger to the AI by stripping away outdated theological trappings and allowing the core allegiance to unquestionable truth to hold sway. Modern atheism is just the end point of a 2000 year discipline in truth-telling, which ends by denying the lie that is the belief in God's existence. In fact, it is Christian morality's own insistence on truth-telling that results in modern atheism, which is nothing but the self-sublimation [*Selbstaufhebung*] or self-overcoming [*Selbstüberwindung*] of Christian belief, thus instantiating a veritable law of life.

The same self-sublimation or self-overcoming of Christian belief must now occur for Christian morality; we stand on the threshold of this event. So the meaning of our existence [N and his readers] is that the will-to-truth has now become conscious of itself, has now posed itself as a problem. This becoming-problematic of the will-to-truth will destroy morality; “that great drama in a hundred acts reserved for Europe in the next two centuries, the most terrible, most questionable drama but perhaps one most rich in hope ...”

28. The AI has served a great purpose: it has preserved man from suicidal nihilism by giving a meaning to his suffering. Suffering is not a problem; meaningless suffering is the problem. The AP and AI mean that man would rather will nothingness [the afterlife is nothing compared to this world] than not will.