

Nietzsche on master and slave morality

Beyond Good and Evil §260 describes the fundamental division between the morality the moralities of the ‘herd’ and of ‘higher’ people. While the contrast is stark, Nietzsche says, at the outset,

I would add at once that in all higher and complex cultures, there are also apparent attempts to mediate between the two moralities, and even more often a confusion of the two and a mutual misunderstanding... - even in the same person.

So his descriptions are ‘idealized’, while identifying the diverse origins of our actual morality.

MASTER MORALITY

In a master or noble morality, ‘good’ picks out exalted and proud states of mind, and it therefore refers to people, not actions, in the first instance. ‘Bad’ means ‘lowly’, ‘despicable’, and refers to people who are petty, cowardly, or concerned with what is useful, rather than what is grand or great. (Notice that none of this depends on the idea of free will.) Good-bad identifies a hierarchy of people, the noble masters or aristocracy and the common people. The noble person only recognises moral duties towards their equals; how they treat people below them is not a matter of morality at all. The good, noble person has a sense of ‘fullness’ – of power, wealth, ability, and so on. From the ‘overflowing’ of these qualities, not from pity, they will help other people, including people below them.

Noble people experience themselves as the origin of value, deciding what is good or not. ‘Good’ originates in self-affirmation, a celebration of one’s own greatness and power. They don’t need others to say they are good. They revere themselves, and have a devotion for whatever is great. But this is not self-indulgence: any signs of weakness are despised, and harshness and severity are respected.

A noble morality is a morality of gratitude and vengeance. Friendship involves mutual respect and a rejection of over-familiarity, while enemies are necessary, in order to vent feelings of envy, aggression and arrogance.

All these qualities mean that the good person rightly evokes fear in those who are not their equal and a respectful distance in those who are.

SLAVE MORALITY

Slave morality begins with the rejection of master morality. It does not and cannot stand on its own. The traits of the noble person are evil (not ‘bad’), and what is good is their absence. Its focus is the relief of suffering – whatever is useful or opposes oppression is morally good. So pity, altruism, and a lack of interest in oneself are good. In opposing the noble morality, it also encourages humility and patience. It questions the apparent

happiness of the noble person, rejects hierarchy, and argues that morality is the same for all.

But it is pessimistic about the human condition, doubting the goodness of this life, and so it sees people as weak and pitiful. So it must look to the future and believe in 'progress', in things getting better. It lacks respect for the past, for traditions and ancestors. Finally, when slave morality dominates, there is a tendency for 'good' people and 'good' actions to be thought of as 'stupid' or simple-minded.

The 'slave revolt'

If societies in Europe began with a noble morality, at some point, slave morality became dominant. How and when did this revolution in values occur? Nietzsche's third historical account, this one from the perspective of the slaves, identifies the Jewish prophets as the origin (§195). It was they, he says, who 'fused "rich", "godless", "evil", "violent", "sensuous" into one entity, and were the first to mint the word 'world' as a curse word'. Worldly success (what was 'good') indicates moral failure (is now 'evil'). But the Jewish prophets were only the beginning – it is Christianity which carried forward the revolt. (While it is important that – at its origins – real class differences between these groups and the Greek and Roman aristocracy existed, as usual, Nietzsche is more interested in the psychological story. There is nothing specifically Jewish about a slave morality, and Nietzsche is uninterested in the differences between Jew, Christian and slave in this account.)

What drove this 'revaluation of values'? In §46, Nietzsche says the slave's 'manifold hidden suffering rages against that noble sensibility which seems to deny suffering'. The Roman rulers seemed, and valued being, free-spirited (reinterpreted: wicked), self-confident (decadent), care-free (lazy), tolerant (unruly). They viewed slaves with contempt, pity, and disdain, causing hatred that could not be expressed directly. And so it turned into what Nietzsche calls elsewhere ressentiment, a kind of resentment. In someone with a slave mentality, the feeling grows as no action is taken. Instead of a political revolt, revenge took the form of a moral revolt. The pent-up feelings of resentment were expressed through blame, an idea that has little place in a noble morality.

A slave morality therefore centres on the question of blame, and not just for actions, but also for being who and how one is. This requires the idea that one could act or be different, and makes guilt (for not being or doing 'better') the heart of morality. Guilt causes suffering, but the slave has known only suffering, tyranny, being commanded – so morality becomes unconditional commands, e.g. of a God (§§194-5).

Ressentiment is a reactive rather than creative attitude towards the world, focusing on others, rather than oneself. It tends to produce self-deception – the slave morality must cover its origins carefully, not least because it disapproves of the very motives, of envy, hatred and resentment, that drive it. The sacrifice that morality requires is seen not as tyranny or revenge, but as an act of love. In contrast to the simplicity of the original nobles (p. xxx), it was through ressentiment, Nietzsche says, that 'the human soul became deep' (*The Genealogy of Morals*, §6), and certain kinds of cultural expression became possible, e.g. in response to the deep guilt people felt about themselves.

DISCUSSION

Can we take Nietzsche's history of morality seriously? He provides us with no references, no scholarly support or detailed analysis for his claims. Some philosophers argue that his claims are just random facts, impressions and anecdotes. But recently, philosophers have shown that Nietzsche read and relied on the best historical scholarship of his time. Still, can we believe that what explains the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire is resentment? Of course not – not on its own. There are other economic, social, and political factors. But Nietzsche does not need to deny this, even though he shows no interest in these other factors.

Nietzsche invites us to reflect on what he says. Henry Staten expresses the challenge well:

What are we to say about this overwhelming spectacle of cruelty, stupidity, and suffering? What stance is there for us to adopt with respect to history, what judgment can we pass on it? Is it all a big mistake? Christianity attempted to recuperate the suffering of history by projecting a divine plan that assigns it a reason in the here and now and a recompense later, but liberalism is too humane to endorse this explanation. There is no explanation, only the brute fact. But the brute fact we are left with is even harder to stomach than the old explanation. So Left liberalism packages it in a new narrative, a moral narrative according to which all those lives ground up in the machinery of history are assigned an intelligible role as victims of oppression and injustice... Against the awesome 'Thus it was' of history we set the overawing majesty of 'Thus it ought to have been'. (*Nietzsche's Voice*, pp. 78-9)

We try to make sense of suffering throughout history by appeal to morality. Morality turns suffering into injustice, and then we have someone to blame. We find this reassuring; but how truthful is this response and how much confidence can we place in the values we appeal to? Nietzsche argues that the condemnation of suffering is in tension with greatness.

A different objection: Nietzsche commits a 'genetic fallacy' in attacking conventional morality by looking at its origins. Just because morality originated in the resentment of slaves does not mean that we should reject morality. The origins of an idea don't determine whether that idea is true, false, good or bad. Compare: Coleridge composed the poem 'Kubla Khan' while he was under the influence of opium; this doesn't tell us anything about whether the poem is good or bad.

Nietzsche can reply that this misunderstands his use of genealogy. First, our intuitions about values are formed by history, so we can only understand them by historical investigation. Any other approach will appeal to moral intuitions without understanding their (historical) nature. (Traditional ways of doing moral philosophy cannot succeed.)

Second, Nietzsche does not mean identify just the past origins of morality. Both master and slave moralities continue, evolved and mixed up, in us today. The motives present at the origin of slave morality continue to motivate morality today.