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Phil 490

4/13/2025

Rethinking Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals

In his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche, through the use of the genealogical method, explains why he believes modern morality is the way it is. To illustrate his point, Nietzsche uses a metaphorical narrative involving birds of prey and lambs. In it, he claims that modern morality – which he also refers to by a variety of names, such as Christian morality, slave morality, and herd morality, among others (I will mainly refer to it as herd morality) – came to fruition through the psychological condition of *ressentiment*. According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* caused an inversion in moral values from an earlier morality, which he calls Roman, master, noble, knightly-aristocratic, or modern morality, among other names (I will mainly refer to it as noble morality). However, among several problems with this telling, I find that his genealogy leaves room for another explanation. In this paper, I will explain the part of Nietzsche’s genealogy of how *ressentiment* causes the value inversion, I will propose an alternative genealogy, which is anthropologically informed, based on his story of the lambs and the birds of prey, and I will consider the ramifications of the alternative genealogy.

Before explaining Nietzsche’s view of how *ressentiment* causes the inversion in values, I will explain the values he outlines involved in the inversion. Nietzsche’s concepts of noble and herd morality are two distinct value systems. The former consists of a “good” “bad” distinction, whereas the latter is a “good” “evil” distinction. Nietzsche first gives a glimpse into the values of noble morality when writing how philosophers before him were thinking ahistorically when conceiving of the origins of the meaning of the word “good”. He writes, “Rather it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is the noble, powerful, higher ranking, and high-minded who felt and ranked themselves and their doings as good, which is to say, as of the first rank, in contrast to everything base, low-minded, common, and vulgar” (Nietzsche 10). In other words, the concept of “good” has its origins in the strong and powerful praising them and their acts of being powerful, and anything which is their opposite, weakness, is not good but bad. Nietzsche describes noble morality by saying that its “value judgments have as their presupposition a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even overflowing health, together with that which is required for its preservation: war, adventure, the hunt, dance, athletic contests, and in general everything which includes strong, free, cheerful-hearted activity” (Nietzsche 16). Here Nietzsche characterizes the practitioners of noble morality as having vitality and seeking out activities in life which are self-affirming. Noble morality is a natural result of inequality in abilities and was created to justify and enable the powerful to act out of strength.

Nietzsche further expands on noble morality by comparing it to what replaced it, herd morality. Referring to the shift in morality as the slave revolt, he writes:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who recover their losses only through an imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says “no” to an “outside,” to a “different,” to a “not-self”: and this “no” is its creative deed. (Nietzsche 19)

Here Nietzsche argues that the new values of herd morality are created through what he refers to as *ressentiment*, which occurs when those who have incurred losses by the powerful are unable to amend their losses because they are powerless. By *ressentiment*, Nietzsche means that due to their inability to change their external situation, the intense anger the powerless hold towards the powerful - this deep-seated hatred that has become fundamental to their being - is redirected internally to achieve an “imaginary revenge”. Since noble morality exists to continue their oppression, the “imaginary revenge” the powerless undertake entails the negation of noble morality and all its ways. Whereas noble morality is proactive and self-affirming, herd morality is reactive and self-denying.

The value judgements of herd morality are different from those of noble morality. Nietzsche further describes herd morality in saying:

“The miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are also the only pious, the only blessed in God, for them alone is there blessedness, — whereas you, you noble and powerful ones, you are in all eternity the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless, you will eternally be the wretched, accursed, and damned!” (Nietzsche 16)

In the creation of herd morality, not only were its values inverted from what came before it, but herd morality’s value system of having a “good” “evil” distinction is a significant change from the “good” “bad” distinction of noble morality. Along with the value inversion, herd morality’s transition to “good” and “evil”, paints a picture where there is deep animosity from the good to who it is opposed to, whereas the “good” “bad” distinction of noble morality comes about only because the “good” use “bad” as a contrast from their positive self-perception. With Nietzsche claiming a shift from one morality to another, it raises questions such as: How did the transition occur? What is Nietzsche’s account as to what the change looked like?

To summarize how the transition in moralities unfolds, Nietzsche illustrates both moralities and their relationship to one another through his metaphorical telling involving lambs and birds of prey. In it, the lambs are the weak and the birds of prey are the strong, where the birds of prey snatch up and eat the lambs. It is also implied through the metaphor that the number of lambs is greater than that of the birds of prey, as not only in nature is this actually the case, but it is often the case that there is a one-to-many relationship between a master and their slaves. In support of this, he also uses the words “mobbish” and “popular” to describe various *ressentiment* movements in history (Nietzsche 31-32). In addition, he describes the *ressentiment* counter-slogan as “’the privilege of the few’” and the ‘old lie-slogan of *ressentiment*, “the privilege of the majority”’ (Nietzsche 32). Nietzsche starts the metaphor by saying:

That the lambs feel anger toward the great birds of prey does not strike us as odd: but that is no reason for holding it against the great birds of prey that they snatch up little lambs for themselves. And when the lambs say among themselves “these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is as little as possible a bird of prey but rather its opposite, a lamb,—isn’t he good?” there is nothing to criticize in this setting up of an ideal. (Nietzsche 25)

At this point, Nietzsche believes it makes sense that the lambs and birds of prey act the way they do. Next, he defends the birds of prey in their exercise of dominance, writing, “To demand of strength that it not express itself as strength, that it not be a desire to overwhelm, a desire to cast down, a desire to become lord, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as nonsensical as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength” (Nietzsche 25). The metaphor is one which occurs in nature because Nietzsche is arguing that the relationship between the two groups, where the strong dominate the weak, is a natural occurrence.

A deviation from this natural relationship begins to occur in the metaphor when the lambs come to the idea of free will, which is a necessary step in the process of inverting the values of noble morality. Nietzsche’s commentary on the concept is as follows:

A quantum of power is just such a quantum of drive, will, effect—more precisely, it is nothing other than this very driving, willing, effecting, and only through the seduction of language (and the basic errors of reason petrified therein), which understands and misunderstands all effecting as conditioned by an effecting something, by a “subject,” can it appear otherwise… But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind the doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything. (Nietzsche 25)

Here Nietzsche is arguing that there is no metaphysical “subject” behind the action of “doing”, believing this incorrect belief to be caused by the distortion of language, and rather “doing is everything”. According to Nietzsche, since “doing is everything” is a description of reality, the birds of prey have no conception of free will because they have no need for it. This is not the case for the lambs, as they need the concept of free will to hold individuals accountable for their actions, since responsibility only exists in situations where one could have acted otherwise (Nietzsche 25).

Free will leads to the belief that the birds of prey choose to act the way they do towards lambs rather than believing that it is reasonable for any powerful group to act on their power. This ascribes a moral responsibility towards the way both the birds of prey and the lambs act. With this now realized responsibility, Nietzsche writes:

When out of the vengeful cunning of powerlessness the oppressed, downtrodden, violated say to themselves: “let us be different from the evil ones, namely good! And good is what everyone is who does not do violence, who injures no one, who doesn’t attack, who doesn’t retaliate, who leaves vengeance to God, who keeps himself concealed, as we do, who avoids all evil, and in general demands very little of life, like us, the patient, humble, righteous”—it means, when listened to coldly and without prejudice, actually nothing more than: “we weak ones are simply weak; it is good if we do nothing for which we are not strong enough”. (Nietzsche 26)

Through the power of free will, the lambs choose to contrast their ways with the birds of prey, to act as their opposite. In inverting the values of noble morality and giving birth to herd morality, the lambs have embraced their weakness out of internal revenge when before they had only resented it for it being a limitation on their ability for external revenge.

After concluding the metaphorical telling of the two moralities, Nietzsche relates it to actual history. However, this section was rather abridged. Talking about noble and herd morality, respectively, he begins by saying, “The two opposed values ‘good and bad,’ ‘good and evil,’ have fought a terrible millennia-long battle on earth; and as certainly as the second value has had the upper hand for a long time, even so there is still no shortage of places where the battle goes on, undecided” (Nietzsche 30). In this conflict, although he mentions various battlegrounds such as the French Revolution, Nietzsche says Rome and Judea are the standard bearers of noble and herd morality, respectively (Nietzsche 31-32). Asking himself which one for now has been victorious, Nietzsche replies:

But there is no doubt at all: just consider before whom one bows today in Rome…—and not only in Rome, but over almost half the earth, everywhere that man has become tame or wants to become tame,—before three Jews, as everyone knows, and one Jewess (before Jesus of Nazareth, the fisher Peter, the carpet-weaver Paul, and the mother of the aforementioned Jesus, called Mary). This is very remarkable: Rome has succumbed without any doubt. (Nietzsche 31).

Nietzsche is quite clear that Rome has fallen to Judea. Nevertheless, he does not go into great historical detail as to how Rome fell to Judea. To oversimplify his narration of the historical conflict: Rome existed, Judea came about, Judea now prevails over Rome. Arguing on his behalf as to why he neglected to demonstrate through the historical record how Judea triumphed over Rome, there may have been multiple reasons, but most importantly, he probably believed it to be apparent and intuitive for the audience to infer the details after giving his more detailed analysis of the two moralities: that people find herd morality more alluring than noble morality because it gave them recourse against the nobles where they otherwise had none. However, because he did not demonstrate in a historical context how Judea triumphed over Rome, there is room for alternative explanations which better fill in that gap, which may be more convincing if more historically motivated.

The alternative I propose is that the desire to resist domination rather than *ressentiment* causes the value inversion from noble morality to herd morality. In the lamb and birds of prey metaphor, rather than herd morality being created because the lambs redirect their hatred for birds of prey inward out of a psychological need for “imaginary revenge”; instead, just as the birds of prey created a morality which served them, the lambs create the new values as a means to achieve liberation from the birds of prey. In this alternative, the change in morality directly serves the purpose of having an external social effect rather than an internal psychological effect. The proposed change to the narrative actually fits seamlessly with most of what Nietzsche said in his analysis, although it is not without its consequences, as it does have several implications.

The kind of values of each morality supports the conclusion that the shift in morality was done for the purpose of having an external and not internal effect. Comparing the two moralities, it is most apparent that noble morality is more individualistic, whereas herd morality is more collectivist. The lambs do away with noble morality because its individualistic nature is ill-equipped to end their state of being dominated by the birds of prey. In its place, the lambs espouse herd morality because its more collectivist values are better-suited to solve the problem they face. Nietzsche makes no note of herd morality being created for its collectivist nature, instead leading us to believe that the values being characterized by collectivism are merely happenstance as a consequence of being arbitrarily inverted from the values which came before, which just so happen to be the individualistic values of noble morality.

How does the collectivist nature of herd morality serve the goal of ending the lambs’ domination? Nietzsche clearly says, “Rome has succumbed without any doubt [to Judea]” (Nietzsche 31). However, the possible ways this can happen, according to Nietzsche’s own telling, appear limited, not to say contrived. Because Nietzsche never emphasizes the collective strength of the lambs and only examines the strength of each of the individuals in the metaphor, in order for the morality of the birds of prey to “succumb” to the morality of the lambs, we are led to believe that all the birds of prey willingly join the ways of the herd. I am skeptical of this explaining the entirety of the conflict between the two moralities (although it could explain some of it). It is even less convincing when considering Nietzsche’s own words in the metaphor. When he says, “To demand of strength that it not express itself as strength… is just as nonsensical as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength”, the only way the birds of prey join the ways of the herd would be to act nonsensically (Nietzsche 25). Although it is not beyond the capabilities of anyone to act nonsensically, I am doubtful that all of the birds of prey would fall error to this.

Looking at the anthropological record, there is evidence which supports the alternative view. Christopher Boehm, in his book *Hierarchy in the Forest*, where he discusses early human behavior and its relation to early egalitarianism, outlines:

My main hypothesis is that in holding onto their personal autonomies, the collective weapon of the rank and file has been their ability to define their own social life in moral terms, and to back up their thoughts about political parity with pointed actions in the form of collectivized social sanctioning. Egalitarian society would never have appeared in the absence of moral communities, and it is possible that prehistorically they emerged at the same time. (Boehm VIII).

According to the hypothesis Boehm argues for, moral values have been used by early humans as a means of achieving societal outcomes which preserve personal autonomy (which is implied to be done through the prevention of domination). The set of moral values exercised to achieve this, which he refers to as the egalitarian ethos (Boehm 66), entails that “certain attitudes and behaviors are praised, while others are condemned and punished” (Boehm 67).

In elaborating on the egalitarian ethos, Boehm writes, “Prominent in this hunter-gatherer behavioral blueprint is an ethic of sharing that selectively extends to the entire group the cooperation and altruism found within the family. It does so rather successfully with respect to meat sharing, and to the sharing of decision-making power at the band level” (Boehm 67). Sharing, not only in the realm of material possessions but also in the realm of decision-making, is one of the praised practices which foster an egalitarian culture to prevent domination. People in these egalitarian societies also valued qualities in a leader like generosity, emotional tranquility, and lack of assertive self-aggrandizement (Boehm 72). There are also acts of condemnation which these early societies utilized with the same purpose of preventing domination with practices such as “criticism, ridicule, disobedience, ostracism, deposition, desertion, or expulsion” against those who threatened to establish a system of domination (Boehm 79). All these moral practices, whether endorsements or condemnations, promoted a culture of preventing domination.

Of critical importance, the alternative view of the desire to resist domination causing the value inversion is consistent with the history Nietzsche does draw upon present in the subtext of his writing. Nietzsche refers to the set of modern moral values as both Christian morality and slave morality. Nietzsche had the naming scheme not only because he thought Christians make themselves slaves to their values but possibly for historical reasons as well. If it is true that many of the early Christian converts were slaves, both because of active persecution by the Romans and because enslaved populations were naturally drawn to the values Christianity claimed to endorse, then the alternative view is still consistent with this history, just as Nietzsche’s model of *ressentiment* is.

The alternative telling is not as limited in its ability to explain the conflict. Whereas successful overthrow of the nobles was more of an unintended consequence in the creation of herd morality out of the psychological need for “imaginary revenge”, this is not the case in the alternative telling. It recognizes that the slaves were able to prevail over their masters precisely because they were always the stronger group. However, they were not able to act on the collective strength because they were limited by the values of noble morality. Herd morality, being created by the herd for its collectivist quality, binds the herd together and thereby enables the herd to act on its collective strength it always had to overthrow the nobles. This thought echoes in the metaphor. Although individually, the lambs are not physically stronger than the birds of prey, together, they do hold a kind of power over the birds of prey. The birds of prey depend on the lambs for sustenance; without the lambs, the birds of prey would simply starve. The slaves knowing that their masters need them more than they need their masters leads them to pursue the means to successfully overthrow their masters, which is the creation of herd morality. In this alternative telling, herd morality comes to triumph over noble morality because not only is there still the possibility for the nobles to willingly give up their power and join the herd, but if they choose not to, then the herd has the ability to conquer them. Despite it likely being some combination of the two, deep historical analysis is required to quantify how impactful each was.

In examining Nietzsche’s narration of the origins of morality, although it is plausible *ressentiment* causes the value inversion which creates modern morality, there are some reasons to not be entirely certain in his view. To alleviate some of the pressing concerns I hold towards his explanation, I have proposed an alternative view, which I believe to be just as plausible. The act of detailing it was briefer than I preferred. However, there is a good outline of the critique here that are grounds for a future philosophical work to expand on. Some of the focus of that work could be to dive deeper into the anthropological record to further support or reject the alternative view, explain the Christian hypocrisy Nietzsche speaks of through the alternative view, and explain how the alternative view accounts for the cyclical nature of our values over time. Although this critique does examine Nietzsche’s view through a critical lens, he has opened a rich conversation concerning the origins of our modern morality, where the discourse not only moves us closer to a better understanding of ourselves in the past but also in the present day.

Works Cited

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