Joseph Finnie

Professor Weston

FYS

14 May 2016

Nietzsche's Ascetic Ideal: The Will to External Truth

Nietzsche proclaims: "God is dead." The power of the Judeo-Christian system of moral value is fading and can no longer be viewed as rational in the modern world. Nietzsche fears the cultural crisis that would arise if this dominant system of values is absent in human culture. This previous system in need of replacement is rooted in the ascetic ideal. In his essay, *On the Genealogy of Moral*s, Nietzsche examines how the ascetic ideal became powerful in society to further explore how humans acquire meaning. Many critics of Nietzsche's essay conclude it is an oversimplified critique of this ideal. However, Nietzsche is explicit in the focus of his critique; he does not want to assess what the ascetic ideal did, "rather simply what it *means*, what it indicates, what lies hidden behind, beneath and within it and what it expresses" (3:23). Nietzsche reveals how the ascetic ideal formed as a result of human conscience, and that this emergence gave moral concepts their present meaning. The ascetic ideal is complex with differing functions. Nietzsche understands this complexity -- the ideal's rule over human culture in competing forms -- to encompass the human will. The will's attraction to the ascetic ideal in all conditions expresses that the human will "needs an aim." The weak, diagnosed with the "sickness" of viewing life as suffering, adopt the ascetic ideal in its lowest form. This form of the ideal indicates to Nietzsche the degree to which the will needs an aim; the will uses the remnants of strength in a weak individual to "will nothingness rather than not will" (3:1). An additional form

of the ideal manifests in the ascetic priest, who exploits the ideal for power over the weak. The weak following the priest display a function of the ascetic ideal that generates a lifestyle and culture that is static. The sick who adopt this form, and priest who exploits it, turn "life against life" and place little value in progressing earthly existence.

Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal reveals its dynamic function by uncovering the scientist's relationship to the ideal. The scientist demonstrates the core value of the ascetic ideal in his or her faith in truth. This core faith of the ideal unifies all of its ascetic forms. For Nietzsche, the desired ascetic ideal's belief in absolute truth expresses a powerful human will to truth that controls the construction of meaning. The human will to truth in relation to the ascetic ideal, seeks a truth that is external. Asceticism suppresses one's internal world and degrades one's confidence in independent, personal interpretation; the ascetic ideal provides an external truth. Nietzsche concludes that to replace the Judeo-Christian system of moral value -- the ascetic ideal's external truth -- an analysis of truth itself is needed, the will to truth "becoming-conscious-of-itself" (3:27). Nietzsche's thorough analysis of the ascetic ideal's functions in culture, both static and dynamic, uncovers the human will to truth as the powerful force in the search for meaning; the dominant ascetic ideal has corrupted this will with a fixed, external end to the search.

Humans originally constructed a standard of value separate from the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche uses a teleological approach to reveal that morality originally operated in the legal obligations of society. The ascetic ideal altered these moral values to such an extent, this original purpose can no longer be fully understood. In time, a concept's meaning "crystallizes in a kind of unity which is difficult to dissolve back into its elements, difficult to analyze and, this has to be

stressed, is absolutely *undefinable*" (2:13). Nietzsche begins the difficult task with the advent of consciousness and the concept of futurity. Man adapted in order to control the future to a degree. To do so, Nietzsche explains, man must calculate and compute, "view the future as the present and anticipate it," and "grasp with certainty what is end and what is means" (2:1). This futurity forced man to view his own image and action as the accountable means to reach a desired future end. Thus, man became "*reliable*, *regular*, [and] *necessary*." Consciousness altered the way humans view the past as well. The "*will's memory,*" an "active *desire* not to let go," allowed humans to promise in societal relations (2:1). Nietzsche states, the moral conceptual world has its "breeding ground" in "legal obligations" (2:6). According to Nietzsche, guilt has its origins in the "contractual relationship between the *creditor* and *debtor*." After one promises, guilt was simply the debt to be paid to the creditor. "Every injury has its equivalent" and if the debt is not paid the creditor finds an alternative in punishment. This was not a sense of justice for archaic humans; for, the concept of justice is a "late and refined form of human judgment" (2:4). This punishment took the form of suffering -- the equivalent payment for the creditor was the resulting pleasure in having power over the powerless (2:5). Thus, the moral concepts of guilt and punishment that are at the core of the ascetic ideal are found to originally be the means to hold one accountable in social interactions. Nietzsche's focus on the initial moral values of society reveals the extent of fabrication the later ascetic ideal produced.

As humans and society continued to evolve, the moral values of guilt and punishment developed different, more intimate meanings for human consciousness. Nietzsche identifies the growth of society as what revealed to man they were simply "*the means to*" the "sovereign individual." In this stage of evolution, man became aware of power and freedom, was the

"master of the *free will*" and, with memory and the "privilege of *responsibility*," established his own "*standard of value*." Here, the sovereign labeled his own "dominant instinct" as "conscience" (2:2). In this stage of human consciousness, a distinction is formed between animal and human. While the new "dominant instinct" was conscience, the "old instincts had not suddenly ceased." Nietzsche asserts "all instincts which are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards*," he calls this process the "*internalization* of man" (2:16). Therefore, the previous "dominant instinct" over the human will, primitive aggression, remains in conflict with conscience. This inner world of human consciousness expands in proportion to the obstruction of man's instincts. At this time, Nietzsche declares "the heavens darkened over man in direct proportion to the increase in his feeling shame *at being man*" (2:7). The ascetic ideal becomes powerful at this point, encourages internalization, and supports the concept of "bad conscience." Bad conscience suppresses the primitive violence and directs it toward the self. From this, Nietzsche is able to diagnose a "sickness." The sick feel shameful of their internal animal instincts, constantly struggle to suppress them, view life as torment, and use "bad conscience" to form and validate judgments of moral value. However, it is not only the sick that experience the "internalization" of instincts which arose from the natural process of human evolution. Nietzsche recognizes that for the human will the "meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse." Accordingly, humans developed a will that would seek out suffering if it provided meaning; the masses, both sick and healthy, adopted the ascetic ideal. "Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now" (3:28). Bad conscience and the internalization of man directed the human inward only to compel them toward an external truth offered by the ascetic ideal.

After the formation of the ascetic ideal in society, Nietzsche inspects significant cultural figures for a presence of the ideal and an employment of ascetic values. Nietzsche finds that the artist provides little insight on the meaning of the ideal. The ideal itself means, "in the case of the artist, we have concluded: *nothing at all*! Or so many things it is tantamount to nothing!" (3:5). The artist, Nietzsche explains, relies on previous philosophies. These philosophies may produce value linked to the ascetic ideal, however, artists do not directly deal with asceticism. Nietzsche continues to unravel the usage of the ascetic ideal that appears to be intertwined in culture and moves to the philosopher for a more direct engagement. Nietzsche discovers an intellectual force provided by the ascetic ideal that philosophers use for power. "The ascetic ideal points the way to so many bridges of *independence* that no philosopher can refrain from inwardly rejoicing." This independence, or isolation from society, is necessary for philosophical reflection -- a reflection that must be guarded from personal and public feeling. There exists a "genuine partiality and warmth" among philosophers toward the ascetic ideal which provides an "optimum condition of the highest and boldest intellectuality" (3:7). Philosophers use the ascetic ideal for "a deliberate obscurity, perhaps; avoidance of self-confrontation" and for "something that hides more than it uncovers" (3:8). Contrary to the artist, the ascetic ideal functions as the means for philosophers to gain power. This form of the ideal "does *not* deny existence" but rather affirms existence. However, the virtues of the philosopher, "his drive to doubt, his drive to deny," to investigate, to analyze, "all these ran counter to the primary demands of morality" (3:9). Nietzsche asserts: philosophical contemplation first appeared disguised in the world. "Philosophic spirit has always had to disguise and cocoon itself among *previously established* types of contemplative man" (3:10). This leads Nietzsche to further unravel the connections to

the ascetic ideal in culture by examining the priest, the earlier contemplative man. The bond between the priest and the ascetic ideal is close, direct, and strong. For, "philosophy would have been *absolutely impossible* for most of the time on earth without an ascetic mask," without an "ascetic misconception of itself" (3:10). The initial philosopher wearing this ascetic mask took the form of the ascetic priest. In this particular examination, Nietzsche displays the ascetic ideal in its most dangerous and powerful form.

The ascetic priest exploits the ascetic ideal to further weaken the "sick" and gain power over them with innocent and guilty means. Nietzsche describes the ascetic priest as the "*representative of seriousness,*" the "*negating one*," that "thrives everywhere" in every social domain (3:10). To "*rule over the suffering*," the ascetic priest advocates the formation of an ascetic life in which the sick follow his "brand of happiness." The priest answers those who seek a cause for their suffering: "*you yourself alone are to blame for yourself*" (3:15). With the priest's brand, "the sick man has been made into 'the sinner'" (3:20). Nietzsche labels this act of the ascetic priest as a "guilty" method to attain power over the sick. "Whilst he soothes the pain caused by the wound" by giving the suffering a cause, the ascetic priest "*poisons the wound at the same time*" (3:15). The ascetic priest uses the "feeling of guilt" as the main tool in provoking "an excess of feeling" in the sick (3:19). The priest use of guilt gives the sick's "*ressentiment*" a "backwards direction" in order to "*exploit* the bad instincts" and increase the need for asceticism (3:15). Nietzsche is using "*ressentiment*" to convey the hostility directed at the cause of one's suffering which, in feeling inferior, the individual reverses to justify their weakness. In following the ascetic life, an individual directs the process of "*ressentiment*" inward, further weakening the self in endless conflict. This reversed "*ressentiment*" creates a structure of power in which the

controller, the ascetic priest, can not be accused or overthrown by the "sinner." The ascetic priest further ensures the safety of his power through "innocent" means that attempt to dull the sensations of life. Nietzsche describes the sick following this method "fight against that dominating lethargy with methods that reduce the awareness of life." In the "blessing of work," the ascetic priest advertises work's "*mechanical activity*" as a method to momentarily weaken the consciousness of sin (3:18). These methods of dulling lead to the common expression "loss of self." A loss of self is the loss of a will and, consequently, of strength. The escape the ascetic priest offers in his "brand of happiness" is brief. Nietzsche explains that neither Christian or Indian ways of thinking regard "'salvation' as attainable through virtue" (3:17). This low form of the ascetic ideal keeps its followers tamed with weak consciousness and does not provide a path to power. Any excess strength one does possess is directed toward the "sinful" self. In the end, the ascetic priest has used asceticism to control what Nietzsche calls the "herd" -- a collection of weak individuals who naturally strive together (3:19).

Having explored the ascetic ideal in its lowest, most manipulated form, Nietzsche provided the harmful function of the ideal in human culture: a means that takes advantage of the conscience to produce control, power, and inequality. What can viewing this previous effect of the ascetic ideal from the perspective of the sick and not the priest reveal about the human will? Moreover, what are the individual and cultural implications of a sick human will? Nietzsche finds the will in a sick condition to be paradoxical. He explains the sick still possess a will desiring power, however, it is a will that seeks mastery "over life itself" and not over something in life; a will that looks "for *error* precisely where the actual instinct for life most unconditionally judges there to be truth" (3:12). The developed consciousness perceives what is

life and gives the impression of seeing all of life. However, humans are limited; the ascetic ideal provides a feeling of limitlessness. The sick human will does not possess enough strength to master something in life, "rather than not will" it "prefers to will *nothingness*" with the ideal (3:1). The suffering human, instead of not willing, directs the will toward a reason for life and returns by giving meaning to the suffering itself. This paradoxical will, in discovering meaning that promotes suffering, worsens and improves the sick's existence since the "meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse" (3:28). This ascetic ideal is "a trick for the *preservation* of life" that creates a "conflict that *wills* itself to be conflicting." In using this form of the ideal, a culture becomes static. The collective place little value in current, earthly existence; to them, "life counts as a bridge to that other existence" (3:11). Therefore, progressing one's existence, acting in culture toward innovation, is meaningless -- the "real" life comes after death. This static nature is secure in the sick. Nietzsche has affirmed that this ascetic ideal eases suffering without curing the sickness; it does not allow the sick to gain enough strength independent of the ideal to progress their existence (3:15). The strength of the will is used to advance suffering, leaving the individual incapable and static.

The core of the ascetic ideal "expresses a will" and has a "*goal*." The ascetic priest has shown the power the ascetic interpretation has over human will and culture. Requiring a replacing system of value, Nietzsche initially focuses on science for potential opposing power to the ascetic ideal. He states, "There is nothing on earth of any power that does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to existence," a "means to *its* goal" (3:23). The meaning science contains first appears at a promising distance from the ascetic ideal. Science denies religion, is not based on a moral code, and seems to oppose an interpretation of its results. However, as

Nietzsche continues to search for science's "right to existence," it becomes closer to the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche views the scientific conscience as an "abyss." The depths of science serve as a "hiding place" for a lack of ideals. The abyss of science "never creates values" -- if facts remain independent of interpretation, they remain useless. Nietzsche has found to this point, the received meaning of the ascetic ideal is the ascetic ideal itself; it "confirms only with reference to *its* interpretation" (3:23). Therefore, Nietzsche understands science is not "inherently antagonistic" in its relationship with the ascetic ideal with its need for interpretation (3:25). Science "has *no* faith in itself." Scientists "*believe in truth*" and give value to science as the source of truth. This unconditional faith in truth is "*faith in the ascetic ideal itself*," both "share the same faith that truth cannot be assessed or criticized" (3:24). With this, Nietzsche discovers what is hidden within the ascetic ideal. Science's use of the ideal stripped the ideal's exterior built by the priest; Nietzsche, knowing it "expresses a will," finds at the core of the ascetic ideal the will to truth. The essence of the ideal is its claim of an absolute truth, of a single interpretation of reality. Nietzsche had to analyze the multiple forms of the ascetic ideal to reveal the thread that linked them all: the will to truth. The human will needs an aim and it seeks this "truth" at the core of the ascetic ideal. Even atheists denying the existence of God display a "*remnant* of an ideal" with the will to truth the basis of atheism (3:27). Nietzsche concludes that science "is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather the latter's own *most recent and noble manifestation*" (3:23). Contrary to the static ideal used by the sick, this manifestation allows for a dynamic existence. The removal of the ascetic ideal's exterior which suppressed life, allows one the strength to progress current existence within the confines of the ideal's core faith in absolute truth.

Nietzsche's genealogy exhibited the power in the ascetic ideal's will to truth. As this power grew in various forms, it became evident that society and the formation of value are inevitably joined. The coming together of individual interpretations in society led to an external truth that detached the individual from their interpretation. The ascetic ideal provided this external truth, reforming reality around absolutes. While the constructed reality of the ideal allows for both static and dynamic cultures, the ascetic ideal's core truth limits all progress at the individual level. Nietzsche says we must avoid being "an eye turned in no direction at all." One following the ascetic ideal is this symbolic, directionless eye. The eye one formerly relied on to see, to actively seek with "interpretive powers," is blinded by the ascetic ideal's single, absolute interpretation (3:12). Nietzsche has shown that the moral concepts of bad conscience, guilt, and sin are not concrete but fabricated by the ideal. If the previous ascetic system of moral value is to be replaced with an improved system, Nietzsche stresses an examination of the value of truth itself. The external truth one perceives to be objective is made objective by human interpretation. The truth is formed when it becomes internalized. Therefore, without the ascetic interpretation, exterior truth has no meaning without the individual. The antithesis of the ascetic ideal would be an acceptance of one's internal world, a human will to truth that does not settle, continually interprets, and forms meaning in seeing.

Citation:

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Horace Barnett Samuel. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.