Friedrich Nietzsche's Ethics

Beyond Good and Evil

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March 18, 2025

# Introduction: Friedrich Nietzsche and His Ethical Thought

- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the most radical and influential philosophers of the 19th century.
- His ethical philosophy challenges traditional morality at its foundations, questioning its assumptions and origins.
- Nietzsche rejects universal moral codes in favor of a focus on human excellence and individual flourishing.
- His ideas remain controversial, widely misunderstood, and often challenging for beginning readers.

Key Question

What if conventional morality is not beneficial for all human beings, but actually prevents some from achieving their full potential?

Who Was Nietzsche? A Brief Biography

- Born in Prussia in 1844, Nietzsche was the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was only five years old.
- He became the youngest professor of classical philology at the University of Basel at age 24, before health issues forced him to retire.
- From 1879 until 1889, Nietzsche lived as an independent philosopher, writing his most important works.
- In January 1889, he suffered a mental collapse and spent his final silent years in the care of his mother and sister until his death in 1900.

| 1844 Birth | 1868 Professor | 1879 Independent | 1889 Collapse | 1900 Death |
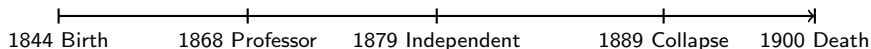
Nietzsche's Writing Style: Provocative and Aphoristic

- Nietzsche deliberately avoided writing systematic philosophical treatises, preferring a more literary approach.
- He wrote in an **aphoristic style** - short, dense paragraphs expressing complete thoughts that reward careful reading.
- His tone is often provocative, using hyperbole, metaphor, and shocking statements to challenge readers' assumptions.
- Nietzsche wants to shake readers awake rather than merely present arguments for intellectual consideration.

Example from *Beyond Good and Evil*

"Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant has grown."

The Historical Context: Post-Enlightenment Europe

- Nietzsche wrote during a time of significant cultural and intellectual transition in Europe, as traditional religious authority declined.
- The rise of science, industrialization, and democratic movements were reshaping society and challenging old values.
- The phrase **"God is dead"** captures Nietzsche's recognition that European culture was losing its religious foundations.
- He saw both dangers and opportunities in this transition, warning of potential nihilism but also the chance for new values.

Historical Influences

- Ancient Greek culture (especially pre-Socratic philosophers)
- German Romanticism and idealism
- Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism
- Darwin's evolutionary theory

Key Works in Nietzsche's Ethics

- *Human, All Too Human* (1878): Nietzsche's first work to directly criticize morality and religion.
- *The Gay Science* (1882): Introduces the "death of God" and eternal recurrence concepts.
- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885): Fictional narrative presenting Nietzsche's most famous ideas.
- *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887): His most sustained critique of conventional morality's historical development.

Early Period	Classical philology, influence of Wagner and Schopenhauer
Middle Period	Break with earlier influences, focus on psychology and critique
Late Period	Most influential ethical works, revaluation of values

What Makes Nietzsche's Ethics Different?

- Unlike Kant or utilitarians, Nietzsche does not provide a systematic theory of right action or moral rules.
- He offers a **critique of morality itself**, questioning its origin, value, and effects on human flourishing.
- Nietzsche employs a **genealogical method**, examining how moral concepts developed historically rather than assuming their eternal truth.
- His approach is descriptive and evaluative rather than prescriptive, focusing on psychological and cultural analysis.

> Traditional Ethics
> (What is
> right/wrong?)

> Nietzschean Ethics
> (Why do we think
> this is right/wrong?)

Nietzsche's Big Question: What's Wrong with Morality?

- Nietzsche asks: What if conventional morality is harmful to the flourishing of exceptional individuals?
- He challenges us to reexamine our moral assumptions rather than just accepting them as given.
- Morality might be useful for maintaining social order but could constrain human excellence and creativity.
- His critique is not about rejecting all values but questioning whether our current values serve human flourishing.

Central Claim

"What if a symptom of regression lurked in the 'good'... So that morality itself were to blame if the highest power and splendor possible to the type man was never in fact attained?" (GM Preface:6)

Understanding "Morality in the Pejorative Sense" (MPS)

- Nietzsche doesn't criticize all forms of ethics or values, but targets what he calls **"morality in the pejorative sense"** (MPS).
- MPS refers specifically to moral systems that claim universal authority and prioritize values like equality, altruism, and pity.
- Examples of MPS include Christian morality, Kantian ethics, and utilitarianism, which all share certain problematic features.
- Nietzsche believes these moralities emerged from particular historical and psychological conditions, not universal truths.

Characteristics of MPS

- Claims universal authority ("one morality for all")
- Promotes selflessness, altruism, and equality
- Devalues self-interest, ambition, and competition
- Presents itself as objective and beyond questioning

Descriptive vs. Normative Components of Morality

- Nietzsche identifies two components in moral systems that he critiques separately.
- The **descriptive component** consists of claims about human nature, agency, and psychology that morality presupposes.
- The **normative component** consists of the specific values and judgments that a moral system promotes.
- Both components are problematic for Nietzsche, but for different reasons.

Component	Description
Descriptive Component	False claims about human nature
Normative Component	Harmful values for higher types

Table: Components of Morality in the Pejorative Sense

Critique #1: The Problem with Free Will

- Morality assumes that humans have **free will** - the ability to choose actions independently of causal determination.
- Nietzsche rejects this, arguing that our choices are determined by unconscious psychological and physiological factors.
- The idea that we are consciously "choosing" our actions is an illusion; our consciousness is largely epiphenomenal.
- Without free will, moral responsibility (praise and blame) loses its foundation.

Nietzsche's View

"The 'inner world' is full of phantoms... The will no longer moves anything, hence does not explain anything either - it merely accompanies events; it can also be absent." (Twilight of the Idols)

The "Doctrine of Types": How We're Shaped by Nature

- Nietzsche proposes what scholars call the **"Doctrine of Types"** - the view that each person has a fixed psycho-physical constitution.
- This constitution consists of unconscious drives, affects, and physiological factors that largely determine who we are.
- Our conscious thoughts, values, and beliefs arise from these deeper type-facts rather than from rational deliberation.
- Different human types flourish under different conditions, making universal moral prescriptions problematic.

Key Insight

"Our moral judgments and evaluations... are only images and fantasies based on a physiological process unknown to us." (Daybreak 119)