

Generally, when we think about ethics, we assume that it's about how to treat other people. If you asked the 'man on the street' what it is to be moral, he'd probably say something along the lines of: 'you should be good to other people' or 'you should contribute to society'; or he might even say 'you should do unto others as they do unto you', this, of course, being the so-called 'Golden Rule', which was put forth by both Jesus and Confucius.

What these views---and the various others of their ilk---have in common is that they are altruistic. They say that being good is about being good to others. If you asked proponents of such views whether one ought to be good to oneself, they might not understand the question; or they might regard it as incoherent; or they might do a double-take, after which they would grudgingly concede that, if only after a fashion, one can in fact be good (or bad) to oneself---though they would probably not see one's obligation to be good to oneself as a moral obligation. In fact, they would probably see it as an obligation of a non-moral variety—an 'existential' obligation, if you will—that conflicted with the individual's moral obligations, which they would regard as being self-evidently concerned with the welfare of others.

Nietzsche will have none of this. In his view, the idea that ethics is fundamentally about putting other people ahead of oneself is so much poison. In fact, he thinks it is actual propaganda, put out by weaklings who want to make the strong weak---who want the strong to believe that it is 'virtuous' for them not to be the lions that they are and instead to be sheep and that, as such, can quickly be led to the slaughter.¹ In fact, Nietzsche thinks that Jesus (or, what in Nietzsche's mind is equivalent, the Jews) created Christianity with the conscious and express

¹ The revolt of the slaves in morals begins in the very principle of resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values - a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge. While every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says "no" from the very outset to what is "outside itself," "different from itself," and "not itself: and this "no" is its creative deed (Genealogy of Morals)

purpose not of giving anyone legitimate moral guidance but of tricking the strong into thinking that it was their moral obligation to give away their riches, work for the benefit of others, and—I will say it again—be sheep, as opposed to lions.² And Jesus's own words are not exactly inconsistent with this analysis: 'turn the other cheek', 'the meek shall inherit the Earth', 'render unto Caesar what is Caesar's', 'the last shall be first and the first shall be last', and 'what is a man profited if he gains the world but loses his soul?' (i.e., the way to have a soul is to be poor).³

So that's one of Nietzsche's contentions. It is a historical thesis, not a specifically philosophical thesis, and as such it falls outside the realm of what we, as philosophers, can adjudicate. But embedded in this historical thesis of his is a distinctly philosophical thesis, namely: morality is *not* fundamentally about how one treats others. It is fundamentally about having the courage to be oneself, with the qualification that, if someone has the courage to be himself, then he probably also has courage in general and is therefore likely to be a conqueror of sorts, a Beethoven, a Caesar, a Darwin.⁴

² All the world's efforts against the "aristocrats," the "mighty," the "masters," the "holders of power," are negligible by comparison with what has been accomplished against those classes by the Jews - the Jews, that priestly nation which eventually realised that the one method of effecting satisfaction on its enemies and tyrants was by means of a radical transvaluation of values, which was at the same time an act of the cleverest revenge. Yet the method was only appropriate to a nation of priests, to a nation of the most jealously nursed priestly revengefulness. It was the Jews who, in opposition to the aristocratic equation (good = aristocratic = beautiful = happy = loved by the gods), dared with a terrifying logic to suggest the contrary equation, and indeed to maintain with the teeth of the most profound hatred (the hatred of weakness) this contrary equation, namely, "the wretched are alone the good; the poor, the weak, the lowly, are alone the good; the suffering, the needy, the sick, the loathsome, are the only ones who are pious, the only ones who are blessed, for them alone is salvation - but you, on the other hand, you aristocrats, you men of power, you are to all eternity the evil, the horrible, the covetous, the insatiate, the godless; eternally also shall you be the unblessed, the cursed, the damned!" We know who it was who reaped the heritage of this Jewish transvaluation (*Genealogy of Morals*).

³ That which here glorifies itself with praise and blame, and calls itself good, is the instinct of the herding human animal, the instinct which has come and is ever coming more and more to the front, to preponderance and supremacy over other instincts, according to the increasing physiological approximation and resemblance of which it is the symptom. MORALITY IN EUROPE AT PRESENT IS HERDING-ANIMAL MORALITY...we always find a more visible expression of this morality even in political and social arrangements: the DEMOCRATIC movement is the inheritance of the Christian movement (Beyond Good & Evil).

⁴ The lofty independent spirituality, the will to stand alone, and even the cogent reason, are felt to be dangers, everything that elevates the individual above the herd, and is a source of fear to the neighbour, is henceforth called EVIL, the tolerant, unassuming, self-adapting, self (Beyond Good & Evil).

So for Nietzsche, the supreme moral imperative is ‘be all that you can be.’⁵ Instead of trying to evaluate this position in the abstract, let’s look at it through a biological---or, more specifically, a zoological---lens. How ‘should’ a tiger act? There is only one answer: Like a Tiger! If a tiger were in some way or other made to act like a lamb, that would obviously represent a major assault on its integrity as an organism. Is it *good* that a tiger is an apex predator? Initially, the question seems non-sensical; but let’s look at it from another perspective. Suppose that a team of do-gooders went out into the wild and (using surgery or drugs or some such) stripped tigers of their predator instincts; or suppose they did this but, instead of using biological forms of intervention, they learned ‘tiger-ese’ and *persuaded* the tigers to cease to be predators. Question: In doing this, would those do-gooders be acting rightly? Clearly not. They would be diminishing these noble creatures, and in so doing they would be violating the natural order. True—these noble beasts are predators. But that is what they should be because that is what they are; it is their nature---and it is therefore nature itself. And being their nature, it is, quite literally, beyond good and evil.

It may be non-sensical to say that a tiger has a moral obligation to act like a tiger. But suppose that, like human beings, tigers were intelligent enough to reflect on their condition; suppose they had it within themselves to interfere with their own biological program. And suppose that’s just what they did---with the result that, after a period of being psychologically damaged, they were devoured by other animals. In that case, we could, after a fashion, condemn those tigers. We could call them weak and gullible. We could call them violators of a natural

⁵ It is the aristocratic races who have left the idea "Barbarian" on all the tracks in which they have marched; nay, a consciousness of this very barbarianism, and even a pride in it, manifests itself even in their highest civilisation (for example, when Pericles says to his Athenians in that celebrated funeral oration, "Our audacity has forced a way over every land and sea, rearing everywhere imperishable memorials of itself for good and for evil"). This audacity of aristocratic races, mad, absurd, and spasmodic as may be its expression; the incalculable and fantastic nature of their enterprises (*Genealogy of Morals*).

order---an order that, although amoral relative to our narrow bourgeois ethical norms, undergirds everything we do and is not for us to judge but only to comply with.

Whatever else nature is, it is an endless bounty of life and growth. And when we try to alter nature to make it more moral—or otherwise suit our needs—the results ramify out of our control, often in ecocidal ways. We kill one species of animal because we don't like it for whatever reason; but it turns out that some other species that we do like (or depend on) dies as a result, since it depended on the first species in some hidden way. Or it turns out that the species we killed off—the ‘evil pests’ ---killed microbes that would otherwise kill off entire forests, and all the species therein, and decreasing the world’s air supply to boot.

The point being: As a general rule, it is wrong to subvert nature to get it to accommodate our morality, since our morality simply isn’t sufficiently informed about the various interdependencies making up the natural order. And, so Nietzsche claims, this holds no less of contravening tiger-nature than it does of contravening human nature. Obviously a weak person will see it as ‘good’ if a warrior is emasculated; for a weak person is both envious and fearful of the warrior. And a weak person will see it as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ if that warrior is not emasculated—if he continues to be a warrior, in other words. (By ‘warrior’, of course, I do not necessarily mean actual warrior; I mean anyone who has an ego-positive, self-affirming approach to life, be that person a philosopher, doctor, or actual warrior.) But, of course, the warrior has a place in ‘the grand scheme of things’; for where would we be were it not for the conquerors of yesteryear? And, even more darkly, where would we be had the very concept of being a conqueror—of being a self-affirming fighter, instead of a cheek-turning submissive---been vilified to the point that our ancestors had had their fighting spirit drained out of them?

Would we even have civilization? Is not a certain narcissism inherent in the pursuits that put us in a position where we even have a civilization to condemn?

This is Nietzsche's thinking. In "Beyond Good and Evil", Nietzsche's point is that, for the reasons just given, the natural order is larger than our moral systems. In 'A Genealogy of Morals', Nietzsche's point is that, for the reasons previously given, what we *now* refer to as 'morals' are *inverted* morals.⁶

To elaborate: Society is in some ways like the animal kingdom. Some people are leaders, some are followers. Some are trend-setters, some are conformists. And within each of these strata, there are innumerable variations: within musical composition, there are leaders, followers, half-leaders, half-followers, etc., the same being true of any other demographic. And even within the individual, there is variation, since what a given person is, is likely to vary from context to context.

Suppose that a morality of altruism is foisted on everyone---but especially on the naturally dominant. It will hobble them and will therefore weaken the foundations of whatever they were supporting. At the same time, it will give the weak a way of being dominant, but without actually strengthening them. For it will give the weak the ability to 'judge' the strong---i.e. to condemn them, oftentimes with very real social, economic, or legal consequences---just for being strong. At the same time, the weak, though given a certain dominance by having this

⁶ All the world's efforts against the "aristocrats," the "mighty," the "masters," the "holders of power," are negligible by comparison with what has been accomplished against those classes by the Jews - the Jews, that priestly nation which eventually realised that the one method of effecting satisfaction on its enemies and tyrants was by means of a radical transvaluation of values, which was at the same time an act of the cleverest revenge. Yet the method was only appropriate to a nation of priests, to a nation of the most jealously nursed priestly revengefulness. It was the Jews who, in opposition to the aristocratic equation (good = aristocratic = beautiful = happy = loved by the gods), dared with a terrifying logic to suggest the contrary equation, and indeed to maintain with the teeth of the most profound hatred (the hatred of weakness) this contrary equation, namely, "the wretched are alone the good; the poor, the weak, the lowly, are alone the good; the suffering, the needy, the sick, the loathsome, are the only ones who are pious, the only ones who are blessed, for them alone is salvation - but you, on the other hand, you aristocrats, you men of power, you are to all eternity the evil, the horrible, the covetous, the insatiate, the godless; eternally also shall you be the unblessed, the cursed, the damned!" We know who it was who reaped the heritage of this Jewish transvaluation (Genealogy of Morals).

power to condemn, will not actually be any *stronger* for it; they will not have the fecundity or the productivity of spirit of the strong people they've hobbled. Such an 'inversion' of the social (or, dare we say, the sociobiological) order would clearly have disastrous effects on the general weal.⁷

What Nietzsche is saying in the Genealogy of Morals is that a few thousand years ago, Jesus brought about just such an inversion. Jesus said that the weak are good and the strong are bad; those who submit in this life will enjoy eternal bliss in the hereafter. This inverted morality was not eliminated; the proper moral order, in which the strong are given their due, was not restored. On the contrary, over the millennia this new inversion became more deeply ingrained.⁸ And it lives on in our ethical theories and in the social justice movements they undergird. So, in Nietzsche's view, utilitarianism is a contemporary expression of Christian altruism, the same being true of Kantian universalism. Arguably—and here I'm going beyond what Nietzsche himself explicitly said--the same can even be said of economic thought, since it is to such a large extent an embodiment of utilitarian and universalistic principles. Nietzsche grants, of course, that the modern world (meaning 19th century Europe, though he would hold the same to be true of the world today) is productive; but he seems to think that this is despite this all-pervasive altruistic ethics---that this productivity represents a spark of our true natures that this altruism hasn't extinguished.

⁷ While every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says "no" from the very outset to what is "outside itself," "different from itself," and "not itself: and this "no" is its creative deed (Genealogy of Morals).

⁸ Let us submit to the facts; that the people have triumphed - or the slaves, or the populace, or the herd, or whatever name you care to give them - if this has happened through the Jews, so be it! In that case no nation ever had a greater mission in the world's history. The 'masters' have been done away with; the morality of the vulgar man has triumphed. This triumph may also be called a blood-poisoning (it has mutually fused the races) - I do not dispute it; but there is no doubt but that this intoxication has succeeded. The 'redemption' of the human race (that is, from the masters) is progressing; swimmingly; everything is obviously becoming Judaised, or Christianised, or vulgarised (what is there in the words?). It seems impossible to stop the course of this poisoning through the whole body politic of mankind (Genealogy of Morals).

Without passing judgment on Nietzsche's thought, let us put it into the context of other, related systems of thought. When we consider what Plato⁹ and Aristotle¹⁰ had to say about ethics, it was almost exclusively concerned with internal fortitude---with being self-controlled, disciplined, and clear-headed. They certainly don't hold that one should wrong others. On the contrary, they have more or less the same views that we do as to how one should treat others; one should keep promises, tell the truth, repay debts, not lose one's temper, fulfill responsibilities to children and spouses, and so on. But they hold that ethics is primarily about one's treatment of oneself—it is primarily about being healthy in mind and body. In their view, immorality is identical with weakness, for example, with cowardice or self-indulgence; and, so they also hold, a *consequence* of weakness—of a lack of virtue, in other words—is mistreatment of others. (The idea being, for example, that cowards are too cowardly to be decent to others and self-indulgent people are too busy indulging themselves to be decent to others.) So, how one is inclined to treat others, in their view, is not the essence of virtue; it is a mere symptom of virtue; and the essence of virtue, in their view, is health or inner strength.

Nowhere in the writings of Plato or Aristotle do we find anything resembling the Golden Rule. They do not advocate psychopathic egoism, which they would rightly regard as a sign of

⁹ The good is the beautiful, and the beautiful is the symmetrical, and there is no greater or fairer symmetry than that of body and soul, as the contrary is the greatest of deformities. A leg or an arm too long or too short is at once ugly and unserviceable, and the same is true if body and soul are disproportionate. For a strong and impassioned soul may 'fret the pigmy body to decay,' and so produce convulsions and other evils. The violence of controversy, or the earnestness of enquiry, will often generate inflammations and rheums which are not understood, or assigned to their true cause by the professors of medicine. And in like manner the body may be too much for the soul, darkening the reason, and quickening the animal desires. The only security is to preserve the balance of the two, and to this end the mathematician or philosopher must practice gymnastics, and the gymnast must cultivate music. The parts of the body too must be treated in the same way--they should receive their appropriate exercise (*Timaeus*)

¹⁰ Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme (*Nichomachean Ethics*).

inner weakness. But they certainly also never say that one should turn the other cheek; nor do they say that one should only do what one could coherently want everyone else to do, or that with every action one should try to maximize happiness. In their view, there are certain biological and social norms that simultaneously prevent antisocial conduct but also make allowances for differences between people, and that one achieves psychological health, and therewith virtue, by complying with these sociobiological norms.

So, even though Nietzsche sometimes comes off as a nihilistic anti-traditionalist, he is actually anything but that. He is, as he himself says, albeit obscurely, trying to reactivate a pre-Christian, and therefore ancient, ethical tradition. He basically sees Christianity in much the way that a 1950's patriarch in the US would see contemporary political correctness; and just as the 1950's patriarch would be seen as heretical *with respect to 2022 ethics*, even though he was obviously aligned with some much older moral tradition, so Nietzsche was seen (and is still seen) as heretical *with respect to contemporary (altruistic neo-Christian) ethics*, even though he is aligned with a far more ancient (and, arguably, authentic) moral tradition.

Another reference-point is Edward Gibbon's work History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, published in 1776, widely considered the greatest historical work ever written. According to Gibbon, it was Christianity that destroyed Rome. Long story short: The Romans lived according to noble Aristotelian principles and were the right balance of scholar and warrior. Christianity came along and told the strong that they were bad and the weak that they were good; so the strong laid down their arms (literally and otherwise), and Rome, having thus collapsed internally, was soon overrun by invaders who wrecked whatever was left.¹¹

¹¹ The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister. A large portion of public and private wealth were consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion, and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity. Faith, zeal, curiosity, and more earthly passions of malice and ambition kindled the flame of theological factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody and always implacable; the attention of the

Freud, who worked just after Nietzsche (and was probably influenced by him), believed that, thanks to an acceptance of an altruistic ethics, modern man had become a repressed neurotic wreck. The purpose of psychoanalysis, he said, was to get people to accept and integrate all of the impulses that their altruism induced self-hatred had caused them to repress. In Moses and Monotheism, Freud also said that Christianity was a bad fit for European man; that it was not a European religion; that Europeans were not really able to assimilate Christianity and that, by trying to assimilate it, they weakened themselves.¹²

Because of the disorganized and hot-tempered way in which he presented them, Nietzsche's ideas concerning modern morality and its genesis may initially seem ludicrous. But they are not ludicrous. As the foregoing remarks about Gibbon suggest, his historical contentions have at least some basis. As the points concerning Plato and Aristotle suggest, his ethical ideas are non-nihilistic—an actually anti-nihilistic—even though his own rhetoric often suggests otherwise. And as the points made about Freud suggest, he was on solid ground in holding an ethics of altruism to be unhealthy.

A final note. Earlier we talked about letting tigers be tigers. The idea was that, although it may be ‘morally’ wrong for tigers to be the predators that they are, preventing them from being

emperors was diverted from camps to synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny, and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of the country (*History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*).

¹² The deeper motives for hatred of the Jews are rooted in the remotest past ages; they operate from the unconscious of the peoples, and I am prepared to find that at first they will not seem credible. I venture to assert that jealousy of the people which declared itself the first-born, favourite child of God the Father, has not yet been surmounted among other peoples even to-day: it is as though they had thought there was truth in the claim. Further, among the customs by which the Jews made themselves separate, that of circumcision has made a disagreeable, uncanny impression, which is to be explained, no doubt, by its recalling the dreaded castration and along with it a portion of the primeval past which is gladly forgotten. And finally, as the latest motive in this series, we must not forget that all those peoples who excel to-day in their hatred of Jews became Christians only in late historic times, often driven to it by bloody coercion. It might be said that they are all ‘mis-baptized’. They have been left, under a thin veneer of Christianity, what their ancestors were, who worshipped a barbarous polytheism. They have not got over a grudge against the new religion which was imposed on them; but they have displaced the grudge on to the source from which Christianity reached them. The fact that the Gospels tell a story which is set among Jews, and in fact deals only with Jews, has made this displacement easy for them. Their hatred of Jews is at bottom a hatred of Christians, and we need not be surprised that in the German National-Socialist revolution this intimate relation between the two monotheist religions finds such a clear expression in the hostile treatment of both of them (*Moses and Monotheism*).

what they are would be contraindicated in some deeper way. In this connection, note that tigers, though apex-predators, are not psychopathic killing machines. They don't kill indiscriminately. They kill certain creatures at certain junctures; and in killing them, they are participating in a natural, life-sustaining order. Similarly, in letting the strong be strong, we are not, at least not necessarily, letting them brutalize others. We are only letting them be strong in certain ways—certain socially and biologically indicated ways—at certain junctures.

In fact, I would suggest—and I think Nietzsche would agree—that wholesale psychopathy, such as we see in the likes of Ted Bundy or Scott Peterson---might well be a *reaction* to forced acceptance of an altruistic ethics.¹³

Discussion Questions

What are some examples in our lives of people using altruistic ethics to weaken people who are stronger than themselves?

Can altruism ever be a source of strength?

Is Nietzsche right about about the effects of Christianity on contemporary civilization?

Is there a single ethical code that binds everybody? Or is there, as Nietzsche suggest, one for the strong and a different one for the weak?

¹³ Keith Ablow actually hints at a similar position in his book on Scott Peterson.

Granting that an altruistic ethical code can be used to tear down the strong, is that really the essence of altruism? Is Nietzsche right to hold that altruism is nothing but a way for the weak to poison the strong? Or is altruism something legitimate that, like all legitimate things, can be misused?

Is there a non-Nietzschean interpretation of Christ's injunction that we "turn the other cheek"? Is there any non-Nietzschean reading of Christ's exhortation that we humble ourselves that we humble ourselves? Is Nietzsche taking these statements out of context?

How Christian are European-American values really? Is there anything Christian about capitalism? How do self-described Christian capitalists (or self-described altruist capitalists) square that circle?

What kind of political system is consistent with Nietzsche's ethics? What about Aristotle's ethics? And what about Jesus's ethics? And what are the relative merits and demerits of these systems?