

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

*On the Genealogy
of Morality*

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Preface

We moderns have the advantage over the Greeks with two concepts given as consolation, as it were, to a world behaving in a thoroughly slave-like manner while anxiously avoiding the word ‘slave’: we speak of the ‘dignity of man’ and of the ‘dignity of work’. We struggle wretchedly to perpetuate a wretched life; this terrible predicament necessitates exhausting work which man – or, more correctly – human intellect, seduced by the ‘will’, now and again admires as something dignified. But to justify the claim of work to be honoured, existence itself, to which work is simply a painful means, would, above all, have to have somewhat more dignity and value placed on it than appears to have been the case with serious-minded philosophies and religions up till now. What can we find, in the toil and moil of all the millions, other than the drive to exist at any price, the same all-powerful drive which makes stunted plants push their roots into arid rocks!

Only those individuals can emerge from this horrifying struggle for existence who are then immediately preoccupied with the fine illusions of artistic culture, so that they do not arrive at that practical pessimism that nature abhors as truly unnatural. In the modern world which, compared with the Greek, usually creates nothing but freaks and centaurs, and where the individual man is flamboyantly pieced together like the fantastic creature at the beginning of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*,¹ the greed of the struggle for existence and of the need for art often manifests itself in one

¹ lines 1–5.

and the same person: an unnatural combination that gave rise to the need to excuse and consecrate that very greed ahead of the dictates of art. For that reason, people believe in the 'dignity of man' and the 'dignity of work'.

The Greeks have no need for conceptual hallucinations like this, they voice their opinion that work is a disgrace with shocking openness – and a more concealed, less frequently expressed wisdom, nevertheless alive everywhere, added that the human being was also a disgraceful and pathetic non-entity and 'shadow of a dream'.² Work is a disgrace because existence has no inherent value: even when this very existence glitters with the seductive jewels of artistic illusions and then really does seem to have an inherent value, the pronouncement that work is a disgrace is still valid – simply because we do not feel it is possible for man, fighting for sheer survival, to be an *artist*. Nowadays it is not the man in need of art, but the slave who determines general views: in which capacity he naturally has to label all his circumstances with deceptive names in order to be able to live. Such phantoms as the dignity of man, the dignity of work, are the feeble products of a slavery that hides from itself. These are ill-fated times when the slave needs such ideas and is stirred up to think about himself and beyond himself! Ill-fated seducers who have destroyed the slave's state of innocence with the fruit of the tree of knowledge! Now he must console himself from one day to the next with transparent lies the like of which anyone with deeper insight would recognize in the alleged 'equal rights for all' or the 'fundamental rights of man', of man as such, or in the dignity of work. He must be prevented at any cost from realizing what stage or level must be attained before 'dignity' can even be mentioned, which is actually the point where the individual completely transcends himself and no longer has to procreate and work in the service of the continuation of his individual life.

And even at this level of 'work', a feeling similar to shame occasionally overcomes the Greeks. Plutarch says somewhere,³ with ancient Greek instinct, that no youth of noble birth would want to be a Phidias himself when he saw the Zeus in Pisa or a Polyklet when he saw the Hera in Argos: and would have just as little desire to be Anacreon, Philetas or Archilochus, however much he delighted in their poetry. Artistic creativity, for the Greek, falls into the same category of undignified work as any

² Pindar, *Pythian* VIII. 95.

³ 'Life of Pericles', ch. 2.

philistine craft. However, when the compelling force of artistic inspiration unfolds in him, he *has* to create and bow to the necessity of work. And as a father admires his child’s beauty and talent but thinks of the act of creation with embarrassed reluctance, the Greek did the same. His pleased astonishment at beauty did not blind him to its genesis – which, like all genesis in nature, seemed to him a powerful necessity, a thrusting towards existence. That same feeling that sees the process of procreation as something shameful, to be hidden, although through it man serves a higher purpose than his individual preservation: that same feeling also veiled the creation of the great works of art, although they inaugurate a higher form of existence, just like that other act inaugurates a new generation. *Shame*, therefore, seems to be felt where man is just a tool of infinitely greater manifestations of will than he considers himself to be, in his isolated form as individual.

We now have the general concept for categorizing the feelings the Greeks had in relation to work and slavery. Both were looked on by them as a necessary disgrace that aroused the feeling of *shame*, at the same time disgrace and necessity. In this feeling of shame there lurks the unconscious recognition that these conditions are *required* for the actual goal. In that *necessity* lies the horrifying, predatory aspect of the Sphinx of nature who, in the glorification of the artistically free life of culture [*Kultur*], so beautifully presents the torso of a young woman. Culture [*Bildung*], which is first and foremost a real hunger for art, rests on one terrible premise: but this reveals itself in the nascent feeling of shame. In order for there to be a broad, deep, fertile soil for the development of art, the overwhelming majority has to be slavishly subjected to life’s necessity in the service of the minority, *beyond* the measure that is necessary for the individual. At their expense, through their extra work, that privileged class is to be removed from the struggle for existence, in order to produce and satisfy a new world of necessities.

Accordingly, we must learn to identify as a cruel-sounding truth the fact that *slavery belongs to the essence of a culture*: a truth, granted, that leaves open no doubt about the absolute value of existence. *This truth* is the vulture which gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of culture. The misery of men living a life of toil has to be increased to make the production of the world of art possible for a small number of Olympian men. Here we find the source of that hatred that has been nourished by the Communists and Socialists as well as their paler descendants, the white race of ‘Liberals’ of every age against the arts, but also against

classical antiquity. If culture were really left to the discretion of a people, if inescapable powers, which are law and restraint to the individual, did not rule, then the glorification of spiritual poverty and the iconoclastic destruction of the claims of art would be *more* than the revolt of the oppressed masses against drone-like individuals: it would be the cry of compassion tearing down the walls of culture; the urge for justice, for equal sharing of the pain, would swamp all other ideas. Actually, an over-exuberant compassion did break down the flood-gates of cultural life for a brief period now and then; a rainbow of compassionate love and peace appeared with the first radiance of Christianity, and beneath it, Christianity's most beautiful fruit, the Gospel of St John, was born. But there are also examples of powerful religions fossilizing certain stages of culture over long periods of time, and mowing down, with their merciless sickle, everything that wants to continue to proliferate. For we must not forget one thing: the same cruelty that we found at the heart of every culture also lies at the heart of every powerful religion, and in the nature of *power* in general, which is always evil; so we shall understand the matter just as well, if a culture breaks down an all too highly raised bulwark of religious claims with the cry for freedom, or at least justice. Whatever wants to live, or rather must live, in this horrifying constellation of things is quintessentially a reflection of the primeval pain and contradiction and must seem, in our eyes, ‘organs made for this world and earth’,⁴ an insatiable craving for existence and eternal self-contradiction in terms of time, therefore as *becoming*. Every moment devours the preceding one, every birth is the death of countless beings, procreating, living and murdering are all one. Therefore, we may compare the magnificent culture to a victor dripping with blood, who, in his triumphal procession, drags the vanquished along, chained to his carriage as slaves: the latter having been blinded by a charitable power so that, almost crushed by the wheels of the chariot, they still shout, ‘dignity of work!’, ‘dignity of man!’ Culture, the voluptuous Cleopatra, still continues to throw the most priceless pearls into her golden goblet: these pearls are the tears of compassion for the slave and the misery of slavery. The enormous social problems of today are engendered by the excessive sensitivity of modern man, not by true and deep pity for that misery; and even if it were true that the Greeks were ruined because they kept slaves, the opposite is even more certain, that we will be destroyed by the *lack* of slavery: an activity which

⁴ Goethe, *Faust* II line 11906.

neither the original Christians nor the Germanic tribes found at all objectionable, let alone reprehensible. What an elevating effect on us is produced by the sight of a medieval serf, whose legal and ethical relationship with his superior was internally sturdy and sensitive, whose narrow existence was profoundly cocooned – how elevating – and how reproachful!

Whoever is unable to think about the configuration of society without melancholy, whoever has learnt to think of it as the continuing, painful birth of those exalted men of culture in whose service everything else has to consume itself, will no longer be deceived by that false gloss the moderns have spread over the origin and meaning of the state. For what can the state mean to us, if not the means of setting the previously described process of society in motion and guaranteeing its unobstructed continuation? However strong the sociable urges of the individual might be, only the iron clamp of the state can force huge masses into such a strong cohesion that the chemical separation of society, with its new pyramidal structure, *has* to take place. But what is the source of this sudden power of the state, the aim of which lies far beyond the comprehension and egoism of the individual? How did the slave, the blind mole of culture, *come about*? The Greeks have given us a hint with their instinct for the law of nations that, even at the height of their civilization and humanity, never ceased to shout from lips of iron such phrases as ‘the defeated belong to the victor, together with his wife and child, goods and blood. Power (*Gewalt*) gives the first *right*, and there is no right that is not fundamentally presumption, usurpation and violence’.

Here again we see the degree to which nature, in order to bring society about, uses pitiless inflexibility to forge for herself the cruel tool of the state – namely that *conqueror* with the iron hand who is nothing but the objectification of the instinct indicated. The onlooker feels, from the indefinable greatness and power of such conquerors, that they are just the means of an intention revealing itself through them and yet concealing itself from them. It is as though a magic will emanated from them, so curiously swiftly do weaker powers gravitate to them, so wonderfully do they transform themselves, when that avalanche of violence suddenly swells, and enter into a state of affinity not present till then, enchanted by that creative kernel.

If we now see how, in no time at all, the subjected hardly bother about the dreadful origin of the state, so that basically history informs us less well about the way those sudden, violent, bloody and at least in *one* aspect inexplicable usurpations came about than about any other kind of

event: if, on the contrary, hearts swell involuntarily towards the magic of the developing state, with the inkling of an invisibly deep intention, where calculating reason can only see the sum total of forces: if the state now is actually viewed enthusiastically as the aim and goal of the sacrifices and duties of the individual: then all this indicates how enormously necessary the state is, without which nature might not succeed in achieving, through society, her salvation in appearance [*im Scheine*], in the mirror of genius. How much knowledge does not man’s instinctive pleasure in the state overcome! One should really assume that a person investigating the emergence of the state would, from then on, seek salvation only at an awe-struck distance from it; and where we do not see monuments to its development, devastated lands, ruined towns, savage men, consuming hatred of nations! The state, of ignominious birth, a continually flowing source of toil for most people, frequently the ravishing flame of the human race – and yet, a sound that makes us forget ourselves, a battle-cry that has encouraged countless truly heroic acts, perhaps the highest and most revered object for the blind, egoistic mass which wears the strange expression of greatness on its face only at tremendous moments in the life of the state!

We must, however, construe the Greeks, in relation to the unique zenith of their art, as being *a priori* ‘political men *par excellence*’; and actually history knows of no other example of such an awesome release of the political urge, of such a complete sacrifice of all other interests in the service of this instinct towards the state – at best, we could honour the men of the Renaissance in Italy with the same title, by way of comparison and for similar reasons. This urge is so overcharged amongst the Greeks that it continually and repeatedly starts to rage against itself, sinking its teeth into its own flesh. This bloody jealousy of one town for another, one party for another, this murderous greed of those petty wars, the tiger-like triumph over the corpse of the slain enemy, in short, the continual renewal of those Trojan battle-scenes and atrocities which Homer, standing before us as a true Hellene, contemplated with deep *relish* – what does this naïve barbarism of the Greek state indicate, and what will be its excuse at the throne of eternal justice? The state appears before it proudly and calmly: leading the magnificently blossoming woman, Greek society, by the hand. For this Helen, he waged those wars – what grey-bearded judge would condemn this⁵ –

⁵ *Illiad* III. 146ff.

It is through this mysterious connection that we sense here between the state and art, political greed and artistic creation, battlefield and work of art, that, as I said, we understand the state only as the iron clamp producing society by force: whereas without the state, in the natural *bellum omnium contra omnes*,⁶ society is completely unable to grow roots in any significant measure and beyond the family sphere. Now, after states have been founded everywhere, that urge of *bellum omnium contra omnes* is concentrated, from time to time, into dreadful clouds of war between nations and, as it were, discharges itself in less frequent but all the stronger bolts of thunder and flashes of lightning. But in the intervals, the concentrated effect of that *bellum*, turned inwards, gives society time to germinate and turn green everywhere, so that it can let the radiant blossoms of genius sprout forth as soon as warmer days come.

With regard to the political Hellenic world, I will not remain silent about those present-day phenomena in which I believe I detect dangerous signs of atrophy in the political sphere, equally worrying for art and society. If there were to be men placed by birth, as it were, outside the instinct for nation and state, who thus have to recognize the state only to the extent they conceive it to be in their own interest: then such men would necessarily imagine the state's ultimate aim as being the most undisturbed co-existence possible of great political communities, in which *they*, above all, would be permitted by everyone to pursue their own purposes without restriction. With this idea in their heads, they will promote that policy that offers greatest security to these interests, whilst it is unthinkable that, contrary to their intentions, they should sacrifice themselves to the state purpose, led perhaps by an unconscious instinct, unthinkable because they lack precisely that instinct. All other citizens are in the dark about what nature intends for them with their state instinct, and follow blindly; only those who stand outside this know what *they* want from the state, and what the state ought to grant them. Therefore it is practically inevitable that such men should win great influence over the state, because they may view it as *means*, whilst all the rest, under the power of the unconscious intention of the state, are themselves only means to the state purpose. In order for them to achieve the full effect of their selfish aims through the medium of the state, it is now, above all, essential for the state to be completely freed from those terrible, unpredictable outbreaks of war, so that it can be used rationally; and so, as

⁶ ‘War of all against all’, cf. Thomas Hobbes, *De cive* 1. 12; *Leviathan*, ch. XIII.

consciously as possible, they strive for a state of affairs where war is impossible. To this end, they first have to cut off and weaken the specifically political impulses as much as possible and, by establishing large state bodies of *equal importance* with mutual safeguards, make a successful attack on them, and therefore war in general, extremely unlikely: whilst on the other hand they try to wrest the decision over war and peace away from the individual rulers, so that they can then appeal to the egoism of the masses, or their representatives: to do which they must in turn slowly dissolve the monarchical instincts of the people. They carry out this intention through the widest dissemination of the liberal-optimistic world view, which has its roots in the teachings of the French Enlightenment and Revolution i.e. in a completely un-Germanic, genuinely Romanesque, flat and unmetaphysical philosophy. I cannot help seeing, above all, the effects of the *fear of war* in the dominant movement of nationalities at the present time, and in the simultaneous spread of universal suffrage, indeed, I cannot help seeing those truly international, homeless, financial recluses as really those whose fear stands behind these movements, who, with their natural lack of state instinct, have learnt to misuse politics as an instrument of the stock exchange, and state and society as an apparatus for their own enrichment. The only counter-measure to the threatened deflection of the state purpose towards money matters from this quarter is war and war again: in the excitement of which at least so much becomes clear, that the state is not founded on fear of the war-demon, as a protective measure for egoistic individuals, but instead produces from within itself an ethical momentum in the love for fatherland and prince, indicating a much loftier designation. If I point to the use of revolutionary ideas in the service of a self-seeking, stateless money aristocracy as a dangerous characteristic of the contemporary political scene, and if, at the same time, I regard the massive spread of liberal optimism as a result of the fact that the modern money economy has fallen into strange hands, and if I view all social evils, including the inevitable decline of the arts, as either sprouting from that root or enmeshed with it: then you will just have to excuse me if I occasionally sing a pæan to war. His silver bow might sound terrifying; but even if he does swoop in like the night,⁷ he is still Apollo, the just god who consecrates and purifies the state. But first, as at the beginning of the *Iliad*, he shoots his arrows at mules and dogs. Then he actually hits people and, everywhere, pyres with

⁷ *Iliad* 1. 47–52.

corpses blaze. So let it be said that war is as much a necessity for the state as the slave for society: and who can avoid this conclusion if he honestly inquires as to the reasons why Greek artistic perfection has never been achieved again?

Whoever considers war, and its uniformed potential, *the military profession*, in connection with the nature of the state as discussed so far, has to conclude that through war, and in the military profession, we are presented with a type, even perhaps the *archetype of the state*. Here we see, as the most general effect of the war tendency, the immediate separation and division of the chaotic masses into *military castes*, from which there arises the construction of a 'war-like society' in the shape of a pyramid on the broadest possible base: a slave-like bottom stratum. The unconscious purpose of the whole movement forces every individual under its yoke, and even among heterogeneous natures produces, as it were, a chemical transformation of their characteristics until they are brought into affinity with that purpose. In the higher castes, it becomes a little clearer what is actually happening with this inner process, namely the creation of the *military genius* – whom we have already met as original founder of the state. In several states, for example in Sparta's Lycurgian constitution,⁸ we can clearly make out the imprint of that original idea of the state, the creation of the military genius. If we now think of the original military state, alive with activity, engaged in its proper 'work', and picture for ourselves the whole technique of war, we cannot avoid correcting our concepts of 'dignity of man', 'dignity of work', absorbed from all around us, by asking whether the concept of dignity is appropriate for work which has, as its purpose, the destruction of the 'dignified' man, or for the man to whom such 'dignified work' is entrusted, or if, in view of the warlike mission of the state, those concepts do not rather cancel each other out as being mutually contradictory. I would have thought the war-like man was a *means* for the military genius and that his work was, again, just a means for the same genius; and that a degree of dignity applies to him, not as absolute man and non-genius, but as means of genius – who can even choose his own destruction as a means to the masterpiece which is war, – that dignity, then, of *being acknowledged as worthy to be a means for genius*. But what I have demonstrated here, with a single example, is valid in the most general sense: every man, with his whole activity, is only dignified

⁸ For a brief, elementary discussion of the 'Lycurgian constitution', cf. ch. 5 of *The Emergence of Greek Democracy 800–400 BC* by W. G. Forrest (1966).

to the extent that he is a tool of genius, consciously or unconsciously; whereupon we immediately deduce the ethical conclusion that ‘man as such’, absolute man, possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties: only as a completely determined being, serving unconscious purposes, can man excuse his existence.

Plato’s perfect state is, according to these considerations, certainly something even greater than is believed by his warmest-blooded admirers themselves, to say nothing of the superior smirk with which our ‘historically’-educated reject such a fruit of antiquity. The actual aim of the state, the Olympian existence and constantly renewed creation and preparation of the genius, compared with whom everything else is just a tool, aid and facilitator, is discovered here through poetic intuition and described vividly. Plato saw beyond the terribly mutilated Herm of contemporary state life, and still saw something divine inside it.⁹ He *believed* that one could, perhaps, extract this divine image, and that the angry, barbarically distorted exterior did not belong to the nature of the state: the whole fervour and loftiness of his political passion threw itself onto that belief, that wish – he was burnt up in this fire. The fact that he did not place genius, in its most general sense, at the head of his perfect state, but only the genius of wisdom and knowledge, excluding the inspired artist entirely from his state, was a rigid consequence of the Socratic judgment on art, which Plato, struggling against himself, adopted as his own. This external, almost accidental gap ought not to prevent us from recognizing, in the total concept of the Platonic state, the wonderfully grand hieroglyph of a profound *secret study of the connection between state and genius*, eternally needing to be interpreted: in this preface we have said what we believe we have fathomed of this secret script. –

⁹ Nietzsche conflates two things here: (a) the incident of the mutilation of the herms (reported in Thucydides VI. 27ff.), and (b) Alcibiades’ panegyric on Socrates at the end of Plato’s *Symposium* (221d1–222a6).