ETHICS AND CULTURE (HUM 103)

NIETZSCHE I:
'GOOD AND BAD', 'GOOD AND EVIL'

LECTURE BY RIAZ P KHAN

Historical Origins of Morality

"So let us give voice to this new demand: we need a critique of moral values, the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined – and so we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew up, developed and changed." (Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 7)

"Today it is impossible to say precisely why people are actually punished: all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined." (53)

❖ Moral values are *not* self-evident, *apriori* universals
❖ Moral evaluations are created and interpreted under human conditions
❖ Values cannot be taken out of historical, economic, and social conditions in which they arise
❖ Even simple moral feeling or judgment is deeply historical
❖ An *atavism* or vestige of earlier codes and practices of moral conduct
❖ Look at histories, cultures, peoples, ranks, and types of individuals in order to explore the historical origins, struggles, and conditions of morality

"under what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? and what value do they themselves have? Have they up to now obstructed or promoted human flourishing? Are they a sign of distress, poverty and the degeneration of life? Or ... do they reveal the fullness, strength and will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future?" (5)

"So that morality itself were to blame if man, as species, never reached his highest potential power and splendour? So that morality itself was the danger of dangers?" (8)

❖ Is Nietzsche arguing against the "*value* of [all] morality," or is he proposing certain "life-affirming" values (values *for* life)?
❖ Nietzsche himself doesn't claim to know what is good and evil
❖ Suspects that 'traditional morality' has little or no value
❖ Calls this *nihilism*: the belief that *nothing* is of intrinsic value, that there is no universal or absolute foundation of value

❖ Attacks traditional morality that commands us to champion the weak, meek and humble, poor and less fortunate of society
❖ Traditional code of morality (Christian or Secular Utilitarian) is dangerous because they deny life and conditions for life, and instead lead to passivity
❖ Leads to individual conformity for the social good and poses a danger to the interests, health, and powers of the individual; clogs and deadens the human spirit

Genealogy of Moral Sentiments

❖ Uncovering genealogy of even seemingly simple moral feeling or judgment
❖ Genealogical approach: trace historically obscured dimensions of moral sentiments

❖ What Utilitarian philosophers view as innate moral feelings or sentiments really an *atavism*, or throwback or vestige of complex social conditions that transformed (and thus concealed) earlier codes & practices of moral conduct
❖ What Utilitarians call the individual's personal 'moral feelings' is actually an evolved and internalized value system of the 'many-society' – calls this morality of the herd;
❖ Nietzsche characterizes this moral conditioning as 'morality of mores' – i.e., simple obedience to traditional customs
❖ Moral content of our conscience … formed during childhood, and demands our compulsion without reason; to imitate those we fear and honor (parents & authority)
❖ As adults, we seek reasons for moral feelings: distinguish between moral feelings and moral concepts

Genealogy of Moral Sentiments – II

❖ Moral values of English: the "truly good" is to do good things for others; charity and pity.

❖ Personal pleasure is derived from an 'un-egoistic act' of disinterested virtue. One feels 'better' (more moral) if one does good for others

❖ Relatively late historical development to interpret value simply in terms of its effects on others. *And, this is largely due to the inability to impose one's will and bring about what is desired for oneself*

❖ Nietzsche locates this inability or weakness at the very origin of Western morality

❖ Christian tradition begins with a change, disruption, or "revaluation" of previously existing values, such that action is no longer judged according to one's own end/life, but rather in terms of effects on others

❖ An Inversion: from positive imposition of values to negative reception – from 'something is good because I do it' to 'because it helps others'

Inversion of Values

❖ Moral terms begin with the emergence of social distinctions between ruling and ruled groups
  ➢ Qualities of the former as morally positive, i.e., in terms of moral approval – terms like 'strong', 'noble', virtuous, happy, pleasing … to describe the ruling class
  ➢ By contrast, attributes of the ruled as exhibiting 'lesser' or 'baser' qualities.
  ➢ Distinctions of 'good' and 'bad' on the same (sliding) scale

❖ These ruling values are first threatened from within the 'aristocratic' class itself, i.e., by priestly class.
  ➢ Prevailing set of values are first transformed by those who no longer sustain the culturally esteemed 'warrior' values
  ➢ Replace them with values more in accord with their weakened ecclesiastical and civil functions – cunning, ruse and intelligence replaces valor, courage, strength

❖ Transition to Nietzsche's main concern: the immense fund of resentment found in early Christianity

Slave Revolt in Morals – I

❖ According to Nietzsche, the most significant transformation of values is the moment of their complete reversal or overturning.

❖ This 'inversion of values' marks transition from classical Greek and Roman aristocratic morality to Christian (and, later, utilitarian/egalitarian) value systems – Nietzsche calls this 'slave revolt' in morals or *ressentiment*

❖ The 'slave revolt' consists in the replacement of the aristocratic scale of values with that of the underclass, the slave values.

❖ From this standpoint, what aristocratic morality valued as *good* (strength, power, courage) becomes inverted and devalued into *evil* (aggression, bellicosity)

❖ And, what was formerly *bad* (weakness, passivity, timidity, i.e., powerlessness) becomes *good*

Transvaluation of Values

GOOD

GOOD -- BAD

EVIL

Slave Revolt in Morals – II

❖ The transition from aristocratic 'good' to slavish 'evil' is the key to the 'slave revolt'

❖ In this inversion and devaluation:
  ➤ an enormous upswelling of long-repressed bitterness, bred from slave impotence and suffering
  ➤ Finally finds satisfaction and expression in his revolt against the master.

❖ Not just, or even necessarily, a political and military overthrow

❖ A "psycho-moral victory' (i.e., a substitute for real action) that leads to revaluation of values

The (psychological) overthrow of the master is a 'moral' victory

Slave Revolt in Morals III
'Deferred Compensation'

❖ The slave is induced to positively embrace these negated, inverted values
  ➢ The promise of a real, if deferred, compensation
  ➢ In the form of 'divine salvation' or redemption from earthly suffering
     The promise of heaven for the true believer who suffers at the hands
     of the evil overlord.

❖ The agent of this promise is the priest, the powerless intriguer and
  cunning manipulator of human suffering.
❖ Therefore, the priestly class garners both moral adherence and practical
  support of lower classes and political subjugation of ruling classes.

Ressentiment – I

❖ The specific motivation to 'invert' system of aristocratic moral values takes place as an act of resentment, or what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*
   ➢ Reflects the sense of ongoing bite or sting (grudge) of embittered feelings
   ➢ Lingering or resonating sentiment of sickly revenge

❖ But one that can't be directly exercised
   ➢ Due to a lack of power or will, it must be repressed, deferred and, ultimately, sublimated
   ➢ Connotes the aftertaste of an 'unhappy consciousness'

❖ *Ressentiment* bears witness to a subversion of the will,
   ➢ And, to a subversion or absence of direct action

Ressentiment – **II**

❖ In *Human, All Too* Human, Nietzsche traces the origin of morals according to the power relations of the two social classes:
  ➢ The conquering or ruling ('noble') class has power to strike aggressively & give back benevolently, i.e., by virtue of its power, the ruling class is able to requite (repay good or bad deed); they are empowered to act and express
  ➢ As examples, respect among equal enemies among Greeks & Romans, and this constitutes the aristocratic morality

❖ The slave is hardly free to do any of this precisely because of lack of power; requital or 'paying back' can only be covert, unexpressed, and 'spiritual'

➢ Thus, the slave can compensate himself through a kind of spiritual or emotional hatred of master – this serves as a psychological substitute for real action
➢ Again, the vengeful actions can only be expressed indirectly (as *ressentiment*) rather than directly (as outright revenge) precisely because the slave has no power
➢ The transition from aristocratic 'bad' to slavish 'evil' can be viewed as a shift from higher/lower cultures to inherent dichotomy between good/evil.

Ressentiment in History and the Origins of Morality

❖ Nietzsche identifies the Jews as a historical case of slave morality

➢ **Not** in terms of racial difference, but as a politically subject people in Roman and earlier times

➢ Appears to identify in class (as subjects or slaves) terms, as well as priestly (aristocratic) terms

➢ As a subject people, they could not exact collective military revenge against, e.g., the Romans rulers

➢ Such revenge had to be sublimated (*ressentiment*) rather than expressed in action or outright overthrow of the rulers

➢ "World-Historical People" – The Jews develop under the "discipline of suffering"

➢ The subjection and vengefulness ultimately transformed into body of great law, literature, religion and morals, expressing strength of spirit and intellect

Ressentiment in History – II

❖ The immense fund of *ressentiment* in the Christian tradition.
  ➢ Develops within the context Roman civilization and empire,
  ➢ Finds its compensation not merely in the active exercise of spiritual authority but in the reactive creation of a metaphysical viewpoint that would have the overlords and masters literally burn in hell
  ➢ As compensation for Christian suffering on earth

❖ The slave revolt in Christian tradition grows into "something equally incomparable" – a "new love."
❖ According to Nietzsche, the Christian gospel of love is **not** a denial of revenge, as might be expected
❖ Rather as the bitterest, most poisonous transfiguration (out of revenge) into *ressentiment*, where all aristocratic value standards are abandoned

Ressentiment in History – III

❖ According to N, act of ressentiment is far more subtle means of retribution:
  ➢ Rather than directly seeking revenge or reversal, the act of ressentiment instead subverts the value of the object
  ➢ Rather than striking back at aggressor, one merely denigrates him and pronounces that he is worthless, beneath contempt, evil
❖ Here, the very agency of value-formation is changed
  ➢ No longer is value a function of a subject's action, his forceful self-affirmation
  ➢ It is now a matter of creating value by weak and impotent reaction
  ➢ Here, the subject cannot strike back, for he is overpowered and embittered by his impotence and so "changes the rules of the game"
  ➢ If he cannot attain his real goal of successful retribution, he lessens its value instead. In morally evaluative, if I cannot deal with strength and self-affirmation, I must invert those values and call weakness and self-denial good

Concluding Remarks

❖ The Slave Morality essentially a negative creation of value
  ➤ *ressentiment* itself becomes "creative
  ➤ What Slave Morality calls 'evil' was the aristocratic 'good'
  ➤ Again, this "revaluation of values" is not simply a mechanical reversal
  ➤ It is complicated by the embittered feeling of ressentiment, by the psychological inability (stemming from impotence) to see the enemy as equal, inability of according respect or reverence to opponent
  ➤ Only by viewing adversary as absolutely despicable, unclean, evil and sinful, does one give oneself any moral (i.e., psychological) status at all
  ➤ Thus, by devaluing the "other", one values (elevates) oneself. Thus, the ressentiment-laden values are of reactive and passive nature.