

Ressentiment, Slave Morality, and Priests: Nietzsche's Exploration of Human Consciousness and Transcendence

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Power, Identity, Resistance (Mo/We 3:00pm–4:20pm)

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Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* delves into the roots and implications of a societal reversal of moral values and humanity's development of an ascetic ideal. His writings present a dialectical dimension of these developments through the psychological state of *ressentiment* and the teachings of priests, offering a nuanced argument that goes beyond a simple value judgment of slave morality. Despite this, many misread Nietzsche's work, failing to acknowledge his recognition of the role that priests and the ascetic ideal played in the development of human consciousness and man's capacity to will in the face of suffering and powerlessness. These developments offer some degree of optimism for humanity, despite certain problems that Nietzsche associates with the priests and slave morality, such as their foundation in imaginary revenge and the guilt they impose on man. Therefore, Nietzsche's argument should not be reduced to a broad criticism of priests and slave morality, as an accurate portrayal of his philosophy would be incomplete without acknowledging their specific flaws alongside the important role they assume in giving man purpose.

Nietzsche outlines *ressentiment* as the driving force that led to slave morality's development: "The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge." In these lines and other

passages, Nietzsche characterizes *ressentiment* as a collective feeling of contempt and entrenched hatred that results from the suffering of society's downtrodden, and specifically their powerlessness in preventing their oppressors from enacting this suffering.¹ His allegory involving birds of prey and lambs provides an insight into how the psychological state of *ressentiment* inspired the construction of new values and the foundation of slave morality. It is through the notion that "the strong are free to be weak" that the lambs (representing society's downtrodden) came to rationalize their oppressors as responsible for the suffering they experienced.² This creative application of reason represented a significant departure from the natural state of affairs in which 'might made right.' Indeed, under that simple animalistic framework, suffering could only have been accepted as a fact of nature. But reason demands an explanation for suffering; it cannot accept its senselessness and inevitability — it requires a perpetrator.³ By reframing the actions of their predator as evil, the lambs constructed values:

A good person is anyone who does not rape, does not harm anyone, who does not attack, does not retaliate, who leaves the taking of revenge to God, who keeps hidden as we do, avoids all evil and asks little from life in general, like us who are patient, humble, and upright.⁴

Slave morality is constructed from these values that arise from the psychological state of *ressentiment*, which emphasize weakness and inaction. It represents the imaginary revenge of the downtrodden who were unable to enact what Nietzsche describes as a "proper response of action" (i.e. physical retaliation in the form of violence). Instead, they created new values and belief systems to compensate for their lack of power, gaining validation and a sense of agency.⁵

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 20–21.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 27.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Third essay: what do ascetic ideals mean?" 95.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 20.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 22.

Nietzsche employs a dialectical framework to trace the historical evolution of slave morality, portraying it as the antithesis of noble morality. He argues that the noble and mighty first claimed the right to create values based on their perception of themselves and their actions. Through the contrast they discovered between their self-affirming judgements and everything lowly and common, they termed values that promoted strength, power, and self-assertion, reflecting their capacity to act according to their own will.⁶ Furthermore, in his first essay, Nietzsche characterizes slave morality as not only the inversion of these aristocratic values, but also a completely different way of assessing what is *good*:

Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying ‘yes’ to itself, slave morality says ‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside’, ‘other’, ‘non-self’: and this ‘no’ is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance — this essential orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself — is a feature of resentment: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, — its action is basically a reaction.⁷

Hence, unlike noble morality’s affirmation of the self, the mechanism by which slave morality came to be is a creative rejection of the ‘non-self’. According to Nietzsche, the basis of such reasoning is the *man of resentment’s* conception of the enemy. He writes,

Imagine ‘the enemy’ as conceived by the man of resentment — and here we have his deed, his creation: he conceived... ‘the evil one’ as a basic idea to which he now thinks up a copy and counterpart, the ‘good one’ — himself!⁸

It should be noted that a significant portion of Nietzsche’s argument is rooted in etymology, and he grounds noble morality in the notion of a self-affirming “good.”⁹ In contrast, slave morality is rooted in its description of the external “evil,” a mold of sorts, through which the idea of “good” is cast as its opposite. Therefore, slave morality stands in stark contrast to its predecessor, not

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “First essay: ‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad,’” 11.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “First essay: ‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad,’” 20.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “First essay: ‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad,’” 22–23.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “First essay: ‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad,’” 13.

only in terms of its values but also in its approach to judgment, as it focuses on the "other." Consequently, this form of morality relies on an external world to reject as a means of creating its own identity.

To grasp Nietzsche's overarching argument, it is imperative to explore the subject of priests, who play a significant role in interpreting human suffering and promoting the ascetic ideal. According to Nietzsche, priests embody *ressentiment* — they are evil because their physical powerlessness forces their hate to manifest itself in an intellectual dimension.¹⁰ However, priests are a multifaceted actor; they are society's double-edged sword. From one perspective, their religious endorsement of slave morality promotes weakness and a sense of shame in man's instincts. On the other hand, their ability to explain the unexplainable — the absurd nature of suffering — offers society's downtrodden a perception of control over their destiny, and hence a will to power. Indeed, for those oppressed individuals, their will to power could not be attained via traditional means; but how does the priest accomplish this feat of restoring a will to power for the powerless? Nietzsche writes that priests are the *direction-changers of resentment*; in the downtrodden's search for a perpetrator for their suffering, priests guide them to the conclusion that this suffering is a condition of punishment with a higher purpose, and that the sufferer himself is responsible for it.¹¹ This perspective offers the downtrodden a sense of control over their life and destiny, but only insofar as they submit to the priest's ideology — that only their pursuit of the ascetic ideal will alleviate their pain. Yet herein Nietzsche identifies the danger of the priests. Defined by self-denial and self-restraint, the ascetic ideal they promote emphasizes feeling over doing.¹² While this feeling anesthetizes the pain of the downtrodden, it also causes man to feel guilty about himself, and brings about a sense

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 17.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Third essay: what do ascetic ideals mean?" 95–96.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Third essay: what do ascetic ideals mean?" 105–106.

of tiredness that restricts him from his pursuit of liberation.¹³ However, Nietzsche argues that man's fixation with the ascetic ideal reveals that he "prefers to will nothingness rather than not will."¹⁴ Thus, he describes the ascetic ideal as "a trick for the preservation of life," as it provides the downtrodden with something to strive for and an explanation for their suffering, which in turn gives them a will to live.¹⁵ Through this ideal, and by extension the role of the priest, humanity achieves a new depth of consciousness, as Nietzsche writes that man first became an interesting animal on the foundation of priests' evil intelligence;¹⁶ in slave morality and the ascetic ideal, man's perspective and actions transcend that of the other animals, as he refuses to be governed by instinct.¹⁷ Hence, priests play a complex role in Nietzsche's perception of man's evolution. On the one hand, they enable him to attain a greater level of consciousness, but on the other, they constrain him with sentiments of guilt and shame.

Nietzsche's portrayal of a moral dialectic, and humanity's interwoven quest to escape unfreedom, demonstrates the complex and nuanced nature of *ressentiment*, slave morality, priests and asceticism. Through the interplay between these moments in history emerges a human transcendence beyond his animal nature: the achievement of a new depth of consciousness for man and his capacity to will even in a state of powerlessness. Nonetheless, Nietzsche also expresses the notion that this dialectic has made man shameful of his instinctual nature — that he is now made to feel guilty and tired of himself. Although Nietzsche considers bad consciousness an obstacle in society's pursuit of transcendence, he uncovers hope in the developments that have allowed man to find a purpose in existence. These developments demonstrate humanity's

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Second essay: 'Guilt', 'bad conscience' and related matters," 44.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Third essay: what do ascetic ideals mean?" 69.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "Third essay: what do ascetic ideals mean?" 89.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "First essay: 'Good and Evil, 'Good and Bad,'" 16.

¹⁷ This is an adaptation of a Rousseauian idea that man's acting according to his will rather than instinct makes him unique among the animals.

never-ending quest to aim and will, despite the centuries of barbaric suffering that have plagued its existence.

Bibliography

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Carol Diethe. "*On the Genealogy of Morality*"
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