

ASCETICISM AND THE VALUE OF TRUTH IN
THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS

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From the outset of *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche calls for a sweeping critique of traditional morality. Lamenting the absence of other such attempts, he undertakes an investigation into the specific conditions which have historically generated moral values and, most importantly, re-estimates the worth of these values whose goodness has hitherto been assumed to be impervious to doubt. Asceticism is the most significant ethical ideal Nietzsche narrows in on in *The Genealogy of Morals*, and he devotes an entire section to its analysis; indeed, he has good reason to do so since, for Nietzsche, the element of self-overcoming is the backbone of all moral codes (Kaufmann, p. 211-3). Suspecting a pathological perversion of the will and the origin of bad conscience in the Christian treatment of asceticism, Nietzsche traces the manifestations of this ideal and how it has devolved under the sway of institutionalized religion; furthermore, he exposes its interrelation with the will to truth and power, and questions its overall contribution to human existence. In this paper, I examine Nietzsche's genealogical inquiry into asceticism in order to determine whether he rejects this notion as irretrievably tainted through its monopolization by the Christian-moral interpretation. Asceticism may not be *inherently* good, but is it necessarily and essentially decadent, anti-body and life-negating? I shall argue that Nietzsche does not abandon the ascetic practise and that a Nietzschean re-valuation of the term can promote an opposing form of asceticism which departs from the traditional debilitation of the body and an authoritative position of centered meaning.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche declares that ethics are born of blood, cruelty and torture. His analysis of Western ethics takes us as far back as the very genesis of religious practises, which he perceives to have been founded on a debtor-creditor relation between ancient ancestors and their descendents (*GM*, p. 222). Asceti-

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cism has its origin in the development of this relationship. First of all, pain, according to Nietzsche, was of instrumental value in forging a conscience out of the brute instinctiveness of an uncultivated race of humans. Noble rulers carved the awareness of debt and duty into the minds of others through torture and the sacrifice of those who transgressed this code of obligation. In addition, pain often constituted, in archaic civilizations, the repayment of a debt. Nietzsche asserts that the creditor was entitled to indulge his lust for power with complete license over an insolvent debtor, who offered up his humiliation and pain to the delight of his tormentor. The debt was thereby erased by the psychological "pleasure of rape" (*GM*, p. 196).

However appalling these revelations may seem to us, it soon becomes clear that Nietzsche is not unearthing the nature of this sadistic contractual arrangement in order to demonstrate how far modern society has come subsequently in repudiating such barbarity. On the contrary, Nietzsche claims that cruelty pervades and underlies all higher culture—the instinct to punish has not disappeared but only been driven inward; consequently, people are now ashamed to experience these urges which, bottled up inside, poison the once healthy human being with concepts of sin and self-accusation. Here then, is the inception of the hypocritical bad conscience which Nietzsche never tires of railing against; what had formerly been experienced with "the naive joy and innocence of the animal" is now spurned and denaturalized (*GM*, p. 199). The process which divorces the individual from his or her instinct to dominate inspires the repudiation of the whole realm of bodily functions and a general aversion to life, since life is grounded in these drives and functions.

This radical inversion of the value of the instincts engendered the ascetic ideal. In one of his numerous foreshadowings of Freud, Nietzsche declares that "[a]ll instincts that are not allowed free play turn inward" (*GM*, p. 217); thus, under historical conditions which prohibited the external venting of hostility, humans thwarted and internalized violent urges and ascetic priests ruthlessly terrorized this new "enemy"—their own impulses. Nietzsche deplores this form of asceticism as being an ancillary principle of Christian anti-sensual metaphysics. This practise encourages us to dichotomize spirit and body, privileging the spirit as pure, active, good and deriding the body as the source of all impurity, passivity and evil. Any moral doctrine, such as that of St. Paul, which sees only the

darker aspects of the passions and thus extols their annihilation, provides fodder for some of Nietzsche's most caustic polemics against Christian asceticism (GS, p. 189). Nietzsche rejects the ascetic ideal as it is informed by the Christian bifurcation of human nature on the grounds that it institutes an impossibly distorted idealization that can never be realized; he asserts further that its sole purpose is to assure humans of their irremediably flawed natures and to reinforce a blind hatred of life. Humankind's sense of indebtedness to God (the most ancient ancestor) is then carried to unprecedented extremes. As Nietzsche writes, with characteristic hyperbolic flamboyance, Christianized man

stretched himself upon the contradiction 'God' and 'Devil' as on a rack. He projected all his denials of self, nature, naturalness out of himself as affirmations, as true being, embodiment, reality, as God ... as endless torture, as hell, as the infinitude of guilt and punishment. In such psychological cruelty we see an insanity of the *will* that is without parallel ... [the] will to poison the very foundation of things (GM, p. 226).

Furthermore, this insane will to power which lies at the heart of the ascetic ideal is disguised by adherents of Christianity; Christian sects deny that the motivating source of asceticism is an internalized impulse to persecute others because this impulse is branded as immoral by the devotees of slave morality. Thus, the ascetic ideal is shrouded in a moral halo which prevents it from being problematized or re-interpreted.

Following Nietzsche's analysis in *The Genealogy of Morals*, there is a second way in which the will to power is expressed through the ascetic ideal. At the beginning of the third essay, Nietzsche claims that the manifold deployment of this ideal suggests a deeper tendency of human nature at work—the desire to stave off a void at all costs. He states that “[o]ur will requires an aim; it would sooner have the void for its purpose than be void of purpose” (GM, p. 231). The ascetic ideal is seen to be intimately bound to notions of truth and the whole project of intellectual inquiry, even if the intellectual disavows the more explicit form of sensual asceticism. The ascetic ideal, then, also permeates the will to truth, which in turn actuates philosophical

interrogation. The intellectual mode of asceticism veils the constant sense of a chaotic meaningfulness which lies beneath the seemingly airtight categories of truth, identity and unity—the chaos that threatens to explode the apparently substantive nature of these notions.

Nietzsche maintains, somewhat paradoxically, that even those academics who consider themselves atheists and anti-ascetics are, in fact, the unwitting vehicles of the ascetic ideal in its most purified form. He writes, “the intellectual stoicism which in the end renounces denial quite as strictly as it does affirmation ... spell[s] asceticism every bit as much as does the renunciation of sensuality” (*GM*, pp. 287–8). In other words, the philosopher or scholar may disengage him or herself from metaphysical debates in the realization that traditional categories of meaning fail to accommodate the world of becoming; nonetheless, this philosophical restraint is inspired by precisely the same force (the will to truth) as is the belief in substance and unity. The scholar who prudently withholds judgment in the face of the now-recognized enigmatic nature of existence still, at bottom, retains the belief in the diametrical opposition of truth and falsehood, and esteeming the truth above all else, is driven by the desire to avoid error. The relentless will to comprehend the essence of reality yields, at last, the notion that there is no such essence to be comprehended; thus, the Christian exaltation of “truth” turns back upon itself and destroys its own ethic (*GM*, p. 297). The will to truth, then, is another form of the ascetic ideal, and this will mitigates our fear of the void by positing attainable truth as its aim, even when this truth is non-truth or absence of truth—even when we have banished the dogmatic trappings of substance philosophy.

Intellectual asceticism is related to priestly asceticism in its determination to impose meaning on human existence. While the ascetic priest tries to eradicate the passions which chain him to the temporal world, this very attempt fortifies those chains by providing a meaning and direction for his life as well as the life of his community. From his violent denunciations of the earth spring a reason for the continuation of life, much as the scholar’s suspension of judgment in the hopes of attaining truth in non-truth perpetuates his or her lust for truth. In a sense, then, both forms of asceticism serve an instinct for self-preservation. Although the ascetic ideal intensifies suffering and propagates illusions, in doing so it makes existence tolerable because it *interprets* suffering and *masks* those illusions as

truths. Thus, the willing of unconditional truth (as a means of sustaining life) seems to be a process Nietzsche might approve of, since he would be the last to counsel a suicidal resignation to despair.

However, on the very last page of *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche cuts the bottom out of any reading of the ascetic ideal which renders it ultimately life-affirming. He writes,

this whole process of willing ... this hatred of humanity, of animality, of inert matter; this loathing of the senses ... this longing to escape from illusion, change, becoming, death, and from longing itself ... signifies ... a will to nothingness, a revulsion from life, a rebellion against the principle conditions of living (GM, p. 299).

Although Nietzsche's genealogical path now seems highly inconsistent (first, the ascetic ideal was seen as the source of bad conscience, then as an expedient survival-mechanism and finally, as a reaction against life), Nietzsche, in the end, is indicating what lies *beneath* the will to truth and the ascetic ideal; after all, Nietzsche never asserts that life itself is the ultimate goal of the human spirit. Indeed, while asceticism may have the immediate result of warding off suicide by "spreading over existence the blandishments of illusion" (BT, p. 108), if completely realized, its final culmination is death, its deepest motive is the annihilation of all existence. Being a principle which rigidly excludes other interpretive systems, the ideal reveals itself as being the most extreme expression of the will to power. If error is a necessary condition of life (and Nietzsche believes it is), then the search for absolute truths, truths untouched by change, sin or human failing, must be prompted by a more fundamental drive than that of self-preservation—it must arise from the desire for power. To want to gaze on the bare Medusa-face of in-itself reality, to unveil the naked *Urstoffe* of the cosmos is to desire petrification; it is to desire the impossible—the shedding of one's own particular, finite, subjective point of view and the mind-body aggregate that makes thought and curiosity possible. To want to tear ourselves out of the web of becoming to get a glimpse at what lies "beneath" or "behind" its oscillating illusions is to desire that utmost power and the end of all becoming—death. Therefore, Nietzsche successfully fleshes out the claim which launches the third essay; the claim that the will would

sooner have death (the void) as its aim and purpose than lack a purpose.

Thus, at the end of *The Genealogy of Morals*, are we left to assume that, thanks to Nietzsche, asceticism has been once and for all debunked, devalued, exposed as an inclination one would do well to avoid? Are we justified then in abandoning ourselves to hedonistic dissipation and forgetting about philosophy? Not unless Nietzsche has undergone a complete apostasy, for his works abound in passages in which he reviles the whole notion of eudaemonistic *laissez alles*. Repeatedly he heaps derision upon those who would escape from suffering, bury their heads in the sands of ignorance and acquiesce to a lukewarm, "go-with-the-flow" mentality. Letting oneself go and submitting indiscriminately to every whim certainly does not pave the way to greatness for Nietzsche. Nothing worthwhile at any level of culture has ever been attained without the expense of ruthless sacrifice.

Furthermore, the will to truth as expressed through the ascetic ideal is also not entirely discarded. Again, throughout Nietzsche's works he makes it clear that he holds the uncompromising search for truth and "*the desire for certainty ... [to be] that which separates the higher human beings from the lower*" (GS, p. 76). Indeed, if Nietzsche had decided to dispense with reason and with the metaphysical categories of value that are inevitably congealed in philosophical discourse, he would have ceased writing after his critique of asceticism. That is patently not the case. Though I believe Kaufmann overestimates Nietzsche's regard for rationality, plenty of textual evidence bears out his claim that Nietzsche "proposed to measure power and weakness in terms of man's willingness to subject even his most cherished beliefs to the rigors of rationality" (Kaufmann, p. 232). I believe Nietzsche values logic, consistency and reason, but is also equally aware of their limitations and is unwilling to assign them a superior status in philosophical inquiry. The irrationality Nietzsche objects to is revealed in the will to *unconditional* truth which automatically rejects deception, inconsistency and instinct and endorses rational consciousness ("their weakest, most fallible organ") as the only key to truth (GM, p. 217).

How, then, might one envision a Nietzschean reappropriation of asceticism that does not fall prey to the Christian-metaphysical interpretation? Is it possible that in Nietzsche's writings ideas that

take themselves too seriously by denying the absence of transcendental grounding “are themselves released from the ideologies and passions that have held them and now lead to thoughts and passions that depart from and contradict the earlier, authoritative structures,” as Scott asks (*GM*, p. 211)? First of all, one simply needs to refer back to *The Genealogy of Morals* to discover how Nietzsche re-interprets asceticism for the philosopher who affirms existence. Simply put, “[a]sceticism provides him with the condition most favorable to the exercise of his intelligence” (*GM*, p. 243). Shed of its self-important piety, the notion of asceticism for the philosopher is severed from concepts of moral scruple. The philosopher who is driven to create from an over-abundance of strength does not tame his or her desires out of a hatred for the body but rather because his or her passions are completely channelled into the creative process and thus spiritualized into a higher level of human expression. According to Nietzsche, only the weak would be so afraid of their impulses that they would seek to eliminate them entirely. Indeed, if anything, the philosopher does not wish to destroy the senses and passions but rather to sharpen and deepen them in order to intensify the power of the philosophical project.

The priestly form of asceticism, in contrast, aims at the extirpation of the impulses because it is driven by a hatred of flesh and resentment toward life. The ascetic priest ultimately wishes to inflict suffering, in the form of guilt, upon those who witness his self-mutilation and to reinforce the community’s adoration of him. The affirmative philosopher, on the other hand, views his or her self-restraint simply as a necessary condition of unrelenting devotion to creativity. The philosopher is indifferent to society’s assessment of him or her; the distress of others which may result from this indifference is an inadvertent side-effect, not the primary goal. Thus, philosophical asceticism is stripped of its romantic ostentation and the self-aggrandizing righteousness that pollutes the Christianized form.

Secondly, in seeking a counter-ideal to Christian asceticism, one might consider Nietzsche’s brief comments about art in *The Genealogy of Morals*. Here he makes it clear that the artistic endeavor at least approximates an adverse ideal: “As for art ... it is far more radically opposed to the ascetic ideal than is science. In art the lie becomes consecrated, the will to deception has good conscience at its back” (*GM*, p. 290). Although Nietzsche rejects the artist as too malleable to

defend this counter-ideal, this brief passage offers at least a suggestion of what Nietzsche might have been directing us toward. The artist aims at deception in that he or she depicts the surface, the plastic, the superficial, and lives at the level of externality by employing images that appeal to the senses rather than trying to plumb the depths of reality and ensnare the object of inquiry with a cold, conceptual net. Whereas the metaphysician wants to maintain that his or her theoretical matrix corresponds directly to in-itself reality, the artist entertains no such notions—the artist is aware that the mask is a mask—and thus has a clear conscience when manipulating constructed images. In a sense, then, Nietzsche's own writing is an artistic act in that it refers not to an extralinguistic source of validity but is authorized performatively and with the reflection of its own genealogical configuration. Nietzsche's interrogation of established ideals can be construed as an artistic exercise in the sense that he analyzes different ways in which a term is masked throughout its historical transmutations and at particular historical junctions—indeed at the very start of the inquiry he announces his intention to explore the historical conditions which give rise to moral values rather than to probe into the supposed underlying essence of these values. Nietzsche does not succumb to the illusion that his analysis is independent of masks or that it occupies an objective and neutral (rather than perspectival) status.

At the same time, however, I believe Nietzsche is also driven by the will to truth in his genealogical investigation and thus is implicated in a modified version of the ascetic ideal. What is at stake in Nietzsche's writings is a kind of truth-seeking that uncovers and exposes the blind, restrictive and un-self-critical nature of metaphysical discourse. It is not that Nietzsche believes that the Christian corruption of asceticism conceals and distorts a more fundamental truth about asceticism which will be offered up to us by means of the genealogical critique. He does not suggest that there exist such "correct" definitions. Instead, Nietzsche's ascetic truths consist in problematizing the very notion of stable truths. On the other hand, Nietzsche does make use of certain descriptive formulations and theoretical models (such as the will to power and the eternal recurrence) and, though he never systematizes these concepts, he does rely on them to an extent that indicates his belief in their applicability and validity. Thus, he is engaged to a certain extent in a continuation

of the ascetic project in one of its unpredicted transformations.

What alters this ideal in Nietzsche's work is, first, the ubiquitous movement of self-overcoming that constantly destabilizes the authority of his own position and, secondly, his re-thinking of the object of philosophical inquiry. Nietzsche's own hypotheses are inspired by the will to truth in that they provide an organizing mechanism or serve an explanatory function; at the same time, however, they are undercut by Nietzsche's claim that all such mechanisms are interpretations shaped by one's perspective and thus are exposed as regulatory fictions, models, frames. This strategy of self-overcoming or self-revealing frees Nietzsche's inquiry from the bad faith of the Christian ascetic ideal which denies its hermeneutic falsifying and masking. Secondly, Nietzsche re-describes the notion of truth and thereby redirects philosophical inquiry. For Nietzsche, what renders the will to truth so destructive and life-negating is its insistence on attaining *unconditional* truths which can be grasped with certainty in an ahistoricized and universalized manner. To speak of right or wrong, truth or falsehood *per se* in isolation from a particular context is meaningless. For Nietzsche, the concept of truth is continually destabilized by the reinsertion of terms into the specific context in which they arise and by the refusal of abstract truths. He states, "only that which has no history can be defined" (*GM*, p. 212); thus, since all truth-claims and values evolve in a temporal medium and are influenced by the historical situation in which they appear, no term, it seems, is definable in any ultimate sense. On the other hand, this realization need not abort the truth-seeking project because this project, reconsidered in the Nietzschean manner, does not aim at stable, abiding categories of meaning. The truth-object is, for Nietzsche, always in flux, always subject to continual reappropriation by various viewpoints, yet this lack of fixity does not detract from the affirmative philosopher's project; on the contrary, this instability enriches the meaningfulness of his or her interpretations by allowing for the existence and value of other interpretations. Therefore, unlike advocates of the Christian ascetic ideal who perceive the revelation of the unstable nature of truth-claims to constitute an impediment to all further inquiry, the affirmative thinker has enough resilience to absorb this revelation into his or her search for conditional truths. This realization does not exempt us from philosophizing but instead invites us into a process which is

infinitely more challenging, dangerous, life-affirming and fruitful.

In conclusion, I believe that one can speak of the possibility of an asceticism which springs from an overabundant affirmation of life and which avoids slipping into the extremes of either an uncritical reverence for truth or an abandonment of the whole truth-seeking project. First of all, in the sensual realm, if one's self-restraint is not prompted by a self-righteous desire to evoke guilt in others, involves the deepening and sublimating of the passions and combines a spirit of levity with a refusal to capitulate to a single established norm, the ascetic can embrace life as a whole while transfiguring certain aspects of it. Secondly, if we can avoid baptizing our beliefs as "truths" with deadly solemnity and endure the destabilizing movement of questioning in the absence of solutions, this seems to me to involve a Nietzschean reformulation of asceticism, an aspiration towards the Nietzschean ideal of an "artistic Socrates" in conjoining the awareness of the indeterminacy of the theoretical ground on which we stand with a willingness to commit ourselves passionately to our beliefs. This self-reflexive form of asceticism contains the strength both to confirm that some ideological constructs are meaningful insofar as they address human needs and to recognize the role that convention plays in their construction. The abstractions of logic or the rules of grammar, for instance, may facilitate communication and co-existence with other human beings, but in certain contexts they are certainly not binding. In the end, Nietzsche does not want us to abandon either sensual or intellectual asceticism. The brilliance of his reformulated asceticism lies in the fact that it does not compel us to eliminate all masks but to realize that we cannot exist without them and that a mask which sits before our eyes long enough for us to forget it is there must be problematized and historicized until the nature of its fluidity, contingency, and open-endedness flows through the fissures.

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