

Nietzsche's Account of the Genealogy of Western Morals
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A Presentation to the
First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo
26 July 2009

Background

Born 1844

Insane 1889

Died 1900

Talk is about some of Nietzsche's ideas and not about Nietzsche, the man – but will answer questions about Nietzsche, the man, in the discussion

Motivation – for studying the genealogy of morals (western)

Strict Lutheran upbringing.

As a young student, Nietzsche learned of and accepted the Darwinian theory of evolution.

The implications for Nietzsche:

- Man is an animal, like other animals, and without a soul.
- The Christian foundation for morality is a falsehood.
- There is no basis for human dignity.
- God is dead.

Nietzsche's motivation for studying the genealogy of morals:

- To restore a foundation for morality and restore human dignity in the face of Darwinian reality.

Method

- Philology (as distinguished from philosophy) – Nietzsche was a linguist and philologist.
- Philological analysis of Western value words – identification of distinct moralities as origins of value words.
- Psychological analysis of the source of distinct moralities.
- Historical analysis of the evolution of western morality.
- Philosophical analysis of the current situation and what the future holds.

Philology

Nietzsche was familiar with German, French, Italian, English, Polish, Latin, Ancient Greek, Old Testament Hebrew and Aramaic.

Most European languages inherit their value words from Ancient Greek and Ancient Jewish sources:

GREEK MORAL CONCEPTS	JEWISH MORAL CONCEPTS
good versus bad good = doing well however something is supposed to essentially function; human beings are essentially rational animals – so a good human being is one who reasons well; that is one who questions all	good versus evil good = doing whatever God wills without question
shame = negative judgment based on failure to perform as one expects of oneself	guilt = negative judgment based on failure to perform as God or others expect (there is another source of the concept of guilt)
no sin; “foolish” mortals may do other than what the gods want – but the gods may work against each other to aid or hinder one’s enterprises the closest thing to sin is imprudence	sin; sin is a state arising from doing evil but may be inherited from one’s ancestor’s doing evil
“Yes” to life	“No” to this life
primacy of the individual; individual choice	primacy of the community; collective choice; Nietzsche refers to the community as the herd
competition is the primary means of achieving one’s goals	cooperation is the primary means of achieving one’s goals
one achieves one’s goals through direct action	one achieves one’s goals through cleverness, subterfuge and subversion
good people have the right to take from and even enslave bad people; all non-Greeks are barbarians	good people have the right to take from bad people, if sanctioned by God; only Jews are chosen by God as good people

We find ourselves in the situation where the word “good” sometimes has its original Greek meaning and sometimes its original Hebrew meaning, which are, of course, completely opposite in meaning! (good=questioning versus good=unquestioning)

Which do we mean when we say:

- a good scientist?
- a good doctor?
- a good businessman?
- a good Christian?
- a good employee?

- a good servant?
- a good soldier?
- A good lover?

The concept of guilt has an additional source. Nietzsche noted that in most European languages the words for guilt and debt have the same root. (This is not true in English!) The concept of guilt arises in any communities of near equals, where there are buyers and sellers. Buyers and sellers soon invent creditors and debtors.

A debtor who could not pay was guilty.

In these mercantile societies, the idea arose that the creditor should be able to recover something from the debtor by way of a debtor sacrifice. This could include being degraded, maimed or crippled (remember Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice requiring a pound of flesh closest the heart as compensation for an unpaid debt). This sacrifice could also include being enslaved.

When this concept was projected onto the ancestors, it required that the living sacrifice to those who came before. As the ancestors became gods, the guilt became nearly unbearable and is the source of what Nietzsche calls "bad conscience".

Psychology

Why are there different moral concepts and how did we get into a situation where we seem to have all of them?

To answer, Nietzsche turns from philology to psychology – and remember that Nietzsche predates Sigmund Freud.

Nietzsche believed that Darwinism implied that the motive principle for all living things was the will to survive and reproduce. Nietzsche believed, to the contrary, that the motive principle for all life was the will to power, that is, the will of all living things to overcome and dominate all opposition and that life often risks death or not procreating to acquire more power.

For Nietzsche, this was not only a biological principle but a psychological principle. All living behaviour could be explained in terms of the operation of the will to power.

When he turned to the moralities he studied, he explained them in terms of the will to power. Each morality is appropriate to the situation in which a people find themselves. For the Greek aristocrat, getting more power meant competing for it and that is exactly what their morality reflected. For the Jewish slave, getting more power meant obeying, fitting in with the herd and, when dealing with the masters, using subterfuge and subversion. For Nietzsche, all moralities could be explained in terms of the will to power and the situation in which a people found itself.

Nietzsche refers to Greek morality as a Master Morality, because that is the situation in which they found themselves. He refers to Jewish morality as a Slave Morality, because that is the situation in which they found themselves. For Nietzsche, this is not a racial matter but a matter of situation.

Although he speaks in his latter works of a Master Race, he says specifically that the Greeks were not it and the Aryans were not it and the Germans were definitely not it. He believed that the Master Race did not exist yet and would only be achieved through intermarriage of the European races and he added that blending would also need to include Jews and Chinese.

The History of Morals

How did we get where we are? Nietzsche begins with Jesus. For Nietzsche, Jesus was an impressive individual because he was able to overcome all feelings of resentment and embrace people normally considered lower class and indeed even embrace one's enemies. Jesus message was of a practice intended to establish a Kingdom of God on earth.

Then Nietzsche turns to Paul and performs his own psychoanalysis. Paul was an individual filled with bad conscience, that is, a feeling of overwhelming and unrepayable debt which demanded a sacrifice. Paul realized that he was incapable of following the practice of Jesus and invented the myth that the death of Jesus was just that sacrifice. Of course, this would mean that Jesus must be God and the Creditor pays the debt by making the sacrifice. Then Paul completely perverted the message of Jesus, which required a practice to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, with a message that the sacrifice would be paid if only one believed.

Paul and his followers spread this doctrine to the slaves within the Roman Empire, who used the doctrine to subvert the Roman master morality and establish the power of Christianity. This was followed by the attempt to destroy the "evil" works of the ancient Greeks, which was partly successful. However, many important Greek works were kept safe by Jewish and Arab scholars. The Dark Ages followed.

However, the Medieval Scholastics rediscovered the Greeks and Thomas Aquinas introduced the idea that if reason appeared to conflict with faith, it was because reason was not sufficiently complete. The Renaissance was the result of this rehabilitation of the Greeks and the attempt to incorporate Greek ideas. The Enlightenment followed and the Age of Science began. Science and religion coexisted, if uneasily.

The challenges of science became more frequent, starting with Copernicus and Galileo and reaching a climax in the Darwinian Theory of Evolution. The Darwinian Theory of Evolution heralded the death of Christianity and the triumph of reason over faith. The process is not yet complete and our moral concepts are neither Greek nor Jewish nor Christian, but a mix of all of the above.

The reason of moral language is as it is: language is one of the battlegrounds between Science and Religion, between Reason and Faith and the war is not over yet.

Nietzsche does not believe that the Greek morality will return but that the collapse of Christianity will give rise to amoral gangs and finally to a totalitarian state which attempts to fill in the vacuum left by the collapse of Christianity.

Philosophy

Is there a new morality to follow? Nietzsche's answer is "yes". It is what Nietzsche calls the morality of the future or morality beyond good and evil.

As always, the new morality must be explained by the will to power. For Nietzsche, the moral man of the future, instead of seeking to overcome others, will seek to overcome themselves. Such people Nietzsche calls Overmen or, as usually translated in English, Supermen.

The Overman will use his reason to overcome his passions and redirect the energy of the passions into creative outlets.

How is this explained by the will to power? If there is only the will to power, how can it overcome itself? If reason overcomes the will to power, then there has to be reason in addition to the will to power.

Nietzsche affirms that there is only the will to power. However, the will to power within a given individual can have multiple manifestations. Each passion is a manifestation of the will to power and each of the manifestations is in competition with the others. Each passion is trying to overwhelm the other. You may have experienced this in yourself. Reason is another manifestation of the will to power but it is the manifestation which organizes the other manifestations; reason organizes the chaos of the passions. One way that reason may accomplish this is to oppose and thus weaken the passions or oppose one passion to another to weaken both. The Overman uses reason to sublimate the passions, thus maintaining their strength and energy, and redirecting them to creative action.

Nietzsche explicitly disagreed with Kant here. Kant believed that there were two motive forces Duty (Reason) and Inclination (Passions). Nietzsche believed that both were different manifestations of the single will to power.

Nietzsche believes there are three categories of Overman and examples of each have already existed in history:

- The philosopher, who uses the will to power to seek truth.
- The artist, who uses the will to power to create beauty.
- The ascetic, who uses the will to power to create goodness.

Examples of philosophers are Socrates and Plato. Philosophers who build systems don't question their own premises and are therefore intellectually dishonest and not acceptable.

Examples of artists are Leonardo daVinci and Richard Wagner, although Wagner was subsequently booted out for intellectual dishonesty.

Examples of ascetics are Jesus and Buddha. Ascetics that hide in caves and don't do practical works are not acceptable.

Suggested Reading

Nietzsche is easy to read but hard to understand correctly. He frequently and deliberately writes in a way which misleads the casual reader. His advice is that, to truly understand him, you must read everything he wrote in the order in which he wrote it! I would suggest instead that you read under the guidance of his most sympathetic translator into English, Walter Kaufmann. Kaufmann provides relevant background material and steers you clear of the pitfalls.

Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (4e), Walter Kaufmann

Nietzsche's account of the genealogy of morals was first introduced in the book **Thus Spake Zarathustra**, which is included in

The Portable Nietzsche, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann

Unless you already understand what he is saying, it is virtually impossible to understand Zarathustra. Because so many readers had trouble with Zarathustra, Nietzsche wrote two other books with a more straightforward account of the genealogy of morals, **Beyond Good and Evil** and **On the Genealogy of Morals**, both of which are contained in

Basic Writings of Nietzsche, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann

Many people attempt to begin reading Nietzsche with **The Will to Power**. The Will to Power was created from Nietzsche's notes from the period when it is generally acknowledged that he was going insane. It cannot really be regarded as a reliable guide to Nietzsche's real thought. If you must read it, find the Kaufmann edition;

The Will to Power, Friedrich Nietzsche, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale and edited by Walter Kaufmann.