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NIETZSCHE'S *On the Genealogy of Morality*

A Critical Guide

EDITED BY

SIMON MAY

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CHAPTER 8

*The relevance of history for moral philosophy:
a study of Nietzsche's Genealogy*

Paul Katsafanas

The fact is that conversions are difficult because the world reflects back upon us a choice which is confirmed through this world which it has fashioned.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1976)

Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* occupies an unstable position in philosophical thought: it oscillates between seeming damning and irrelevant. The text's central argument is that our most cherished evaluative beliefs have a revolting history: our moral beliefs are the product of a *ressentiment*-inspired revolt carried out by a lackluster, vengeful underclass approximately two thousand years ago. But what is the import of this conclusion? On the one hand, the reader is tempted to agree with Charles Taylor, who writes, "no one can fail to recognize that, if true, Nietzsche's genealogies are devastating" (Taylor 1989: 72). On the other, one soon finds oneself wondering why, exactly, a recounting of events that took place two millennia ago should have any bearing on one's acceptance of modern morality. One finds oneself torn between wanting to insist that the history of our moral evaluations must be relevant, while at the same time failing to see how the history could so much as aspire to relevance.

These reactions are heightened by Nietzsche's own seemingly ambivalent stance toward history's relevance for moral philosophy. Nietzsche tells us that the *Genealogy* comprises "three crucial preparatory works for a revaluation of all values," thereby suggesting that the *Genealogy* constitutes a critique of morality (*EH*, "The Genealogy of Morality").¹ Yet he also insists that "the inquiry into the *origin of our evaluations* and tables of the good is in absolutely no way identical with a critique of them, as is so often believed,"

thereby seeming to reject the idea that the *Genealogy* could serve a critical function (*WP*, 254).

For these reasons, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* generates vexing interpretive questions. How could a recounting of morality's history have any critical function? Moreover, why does Nietzsche write a historical critique, given his seeming disavowal of history's relevance? Any adequate interpretation of the *Genealogy* must answer these questions. More precisely, any adequate interpretation must meet two criteria:

The critical criterion: the interpretation must explain why the *Genealogy* constitutes (or enables) a critique of modern morality.

The historical criterion: the interpretation must explain why the *Genealogy's* argument takes a historical form.

This chapter develops an interpretation that meets these conditions. I argue that Nietzsche's aim in the *Genealogy* is to show that modern morality has systematically (and deliberately) broken the connection between *perceptions* of increased power, and *actual* increases in power. In particular, modern morality leads agents to perceive actual reductions in power as increases in power.² It thereby strongly disposes agents to reduce their own power. This is Nietzsche's primary objection to modern morality: it configures our affects and presuppositions about agency in such a way that it systematically undermines the will to power. Accordingly, when Nietzsche begins the *Genealogy* by asking whether morality might undermine the "*highest potential power and splendour*" of human beings (*GM*, Preface, 6), the text shows that and why the answer is yes.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. Section 1 introduces the currently dominant interpretation of the *Genealogy*, which treats the text as establishing that modern morality undermines flourishing. I argue that this interpretation faces two problems. First, it has difficulty meeting the critical criterion, because it does not offer a satisfactory explanation of why flourishing is normatively relevant. Second, it fails to meet the historical criterion, because it is committed to treating the history as adventitious rather than a necessary component of Nietzsche's critique. Section 2 begins developing a new interpretation of the *Genealogy*, by offering a characterization of flourishing that explains why flourishing is normatively relevant. In particular, I argue that flourishing is defined in terms of will to power, and that Nietzsche has arguments establishing the will to power's normative authority. Section 3 considers an objection to this reading: as a normative

¹ When quoting from Nietzsche, I use the translations published by Cambridge University Press. I have sometimes made minor modifications.

² This is a central point in David Owen's extremely insightful analysis of the *Genealogy* (Owen 2007). Section 7 discusses how my interpretation diverges from Owen's.

principle, will to power seems vacuous, failing to generate any substantive normative conclusions. In section 4, I show that the will to power thesis actually does generate substantive results when it is applied to *evaluative orientations*, rather than discrete, context-free moral judgments. Section 5 shows that this is exactly what Nietzsche does in the *Genealogy*. Sections 6 through 8 explicate this point, showing how, in light of the above facts, the *Genealogy* constitutes a will-to-power-based critique of modern morality. Finally, Section 9 explains why, according to this interpretation, the historical form of the *Genealogy* is necessary rather than adventitious.

I. INTERPRETING THE GENEALOGY'S CENTRAL ARGUMENT

How exactly might Nietzsche's *Genealogy* serve as a critique of modern morality? In the preface, Nietzsche writes,

What if a regressive trait lurked in "the good man," likewise a danger, an enticement, a poison, a narcotic, so that the present *lived at the expense of the future?* . . . 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? (*GM*, Preface, 6)

Here, Nietzsche asks a straightforward question about morality: does it undermine flourishing? Perhaps the most natural way of reading the *Genealogy*, then, is as an attempt to establish that modern morality does indeed undermine flourishing.³

On this reading, the *Genealogy* plays an evidential role: it provides evidence that Judeo-Christian morality has deleterious effects. It does so by contrasting the ways of life prior to and after the adoption of this moral system. Prior to the adoption of Judeo-Christian morality, certain agents flourished, serving as paradigms of health, power, and self-affirmation. After the adoption of this moral system, agents in general experienced a decline in flourishing. If this is correct, it serves as strong evidence that Judeo-Christian morality was responsible for a decline in flourishing.

Christopher Janaway and Brian Leiter have recently argued for this view. As Janaway puts it, the *Genealogy* "strongly suggests that genealogy . . . is

³ This is, of course, a common theme in Nietzsche's work. To choose just a few examples: he writes, "well-being as you understand it – that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end!* – a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable" (*BGE*, 225). What "has been called morality" will "deprive existence of its *great character*" (*EH*, "Why I Am a Destiny," 4). And he warns that "our weak, unmanly social concepts of good and evil and their tremendous ascendancy over body and soul have finally weakened all bodies and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a *strong civilization*" (*D*, 163; cf. *BGE*, 62, and *A*, 5).

distinct from, and instrumental towards, the critique or reevaluation of values that Nietzsche hopes will take place. Genealogy does not itself complete the process of reevaluation, but is a necessary start on the way to it" (Janaway 2007: 10). Leiter concurs, writing that "the genealogy of morality . . . is but *one* instrument for arriving at a particular end, namely a critique of morality. This should alert us to the possibility that the critique of morality does not *depend* on the genealogy of morality, though the genealogy may help us arrive at it" (Leiter 2002: 177). He continues, "the point of origin of a morality has special *evidential* status as to the *effects* (or causal powers) of that morality, for example, as to whether morality obstructs or promotes human flourishing" (Leiter 2002: 177).⁴

Might this interpretation succeed? It is at least incomplete, for notice that the reading as described thus far does not meet the critical criterion. Suppose it is true that modern morality has undermined flourishing. In order for this fact to serve as an indictment of modern morality, we must accept a normative principle of the following kind:

If *X* undermines flourishing, then *X* is to be rejected.

To be sure, this principle has considerable appeal to a certain class of modern readers. But it is not uncontroversial. After all, the ascetic priest will reject the above principle, given that Nietzsche presents ascetic priests as explicitly valuing the *reduction* of flourishing (*GM*, III).⁵ More generally, it is important to recognize – as Nietzsche himself does – that a consistent Christian will reject the above principle. For, as Nietzsche is at pains to emphasize, the Christian is committed to denying that the aim of life is flourishing.

This point is often not appreciated, so it will be helpful to quote at length from an especially lucid analysis of the phenomenon. Charles Taylor has recently argued that we can mark the distinction between secular and religious world views in terms of their answer to the following question:

Does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving, a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing? (Taylor 2007: 16)

⁴ In particular, Leiter suggests that "persons adopt moralities for self-interested reasons," so, by understanding *who* promulgated Judeo-Christian morality, we understand whose interests it promotes: those of the weak (Leiter 2002: 177–78).

⁵ One example: "The idea that we are fighting over here is the *valuation* of our lives by the ascetic priest: he juxtaposes it . . . with a quite different mode of existence which is opposed to it and excludes it *unless* it should turn against itself and *deny itself*. . . The ascetic treats life as a wrong path . . ." (*GM*, III, 11). Here, as elsewhere in the third essay, Nietzsche explicitly states that the ascetic priest views flourishing as disvaluable and the reduction of flourishing as valuable.

He continues:

It's clear that in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition the answer to this question is affirmative. Loving, worshipping God is the ultimate end . . . The injunction "Thy will be done" isn't equivalent to "Let humans flourish" . . . (Taylor 2007: 16–17)

So too with other religions. For example, according to Buddhism, "the way to Nirvana involves renouncing, or at least going beyond, all forms of recognizable human flourishing" (Taylor 2007: 17). Thus, Taylor writes,

In both Buddhism and Christianity, there is something similar . . . This is that the believer or devout person is called on to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case; they are called on, that is, to detach themselves from their own flourishing, to the point of the extinction of the self in one case, or to that of renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God in the other. (Taylor 2007: 17)

In sum, the dominant religions teach that flourishing is *not* normatively authoritative. The fact that serving the poor, mortifying the flesh, renouncing sexuality, and so forth, conflict with flourishing is not an *objection* to these practices; it is *their point*.

But if this is correct, then Nietzsche cannot simply be assuming that flourishing is normatively authoritative. He needs some argument for that idea. Absent such an argument, the mere fact that morality undermines flourishing is not a critique of morality. Again, notice that Nietzsche emphasizes *exactly* this point in the third treatise of the *Genealogy*, arguing that the ascetic ideal – the ideal that has, at its core, the rejection of the claim that flourishing is normatively relevant – has hitherto been the *only* accepted ideal. This is tantamount to claiming that hitherto, flourishing has not been accepted as normatively relevant.

Put simply: saying to a consistent proponent of the ascetic ideal, "you should reject *X*, because *X* undermines flourishing" is exactly analogous to saying to a Nietzschean, "you should reject *X*, because Judeo-Christian morality says that *X* is bad." In both cases, the proponent will view the objection as utterly missing the point.

So the evidential reading faces a problem: insofar as the *Genealogy* is aimed to shake (e.g.) Christians out of their acceptance of modern morality, it will fail. For the above normative principle will be rejected by a consistent Christian. Thus, if the evidential reading is to meet the critical criterion, it will need to explain why flourishing is normatively relevant.

Moreover, a complaint can be lodged against the way in which the evidential interpretation treats the relevance of history for Nietzsche's critique. Leiter and Janaway suggest that the history is not necessary for

showing that morality has undermined flourishing. They do allow history to play a derivative role in the argument: history is a source of evidence for the claim that morality undermines flourishing. However, history, as such, is unimportant; one might just as well gather this evidence in an ahistorical fashion. This is not obviously wrong; Nietzsche may think that history has only a derivative role. However, I submit that the evidential reading would be strengthened if we could show why, exactly, the history might be playing a deeper role, a role in which the history is *essential* rather than just a *perspicuous means* to the critique.

In sum, although the evidential interpretation seems attractive in certain respects, it faces two problems: it needs to explain why flourishing is normatively relevant, and it offers a rather reductive view of history's role. The following sections develop a new interpretation, which overcomes these problems.

2. FLOURISHING IS DEFINED IN TERMS OF WILL TO POWER

Let's begin by addressing the first problem: a successful interpretation needs to explain why flourishing should be considered normatively relevant. This necessitates a more determinate characterization of what flourishing is. I suggest that Nietzsche defines flourishing in terms of *will to power*. Consider again the quotation from the preface:

What if a regressive trait lurked in "the good man," likewise a danger, an enticement, a poison, a narcotic, so that the present *lived at the expense of the future*? . . . 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? (*GM*, Preface, 6)

Notice that Nietzsche asks whether morality might undermine the highest *power* and *splendor* of human beings. In other texts, Nietzsche places a similar emphasis upon the will to power: he not only speaks of "a world whose essence is will to power" (*BGE*, 186), but asserts that "the will to power" is "the will of life" (*BGE*, 259). He claims that "there is nothing in life that has value, except the degree of power – assuming that life itself is the will to power" (*WP*, 55). Echoing this claim in *The Antichrist*, he writes, "What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man . . ." (*A*, 2). To return to the *Genealogy* itself, he writes,

Every animal . . . instinctively strives for an optimum of favourable conditions in which to fully release his power and achieve his maximum of power-sensation;

every animal abhors equally instinctively . . . any kind of disturbance or hindrance that blocks or could block his path to the optimum (– it is *not* his path to “happiness” I am talking about, but the path to power, to action, the most powerful activity . . .) (*GM*, III, 7)

More generally, references to will to power – both explicit and implicit – are ubiquitous in the *Genealogy*. After all, as Janaway points out, we might fairly summarize the *Genealogy* as arguing that “morality’s various phenomena are explained as ways in which human beings, like all animals, strive to discharge their power and maximize their feelings of power under the exigencies of their own characters and externally imposed constraints” (Janaway 2007: 145).

For these reasons, it seems plausible to interpret flourishing in terms of will to power. But what, exactly, is will to power? As Bernard Reginster has persuasively argued, Nietzsche identifies willing power with perpetually *seeking* and *overcoming* resistances to one’s ends (Reginster 2006: 127). For example, an agent wills power in the pursuit of knowledge by striving to encounter and overcome intellectual problems in her pursuit of knowledge; or, an ascetic wills power by willing to encounter and overcome his body’s own resistances to self-inflicted suffering. As Nietzsche puts it, “the will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks out that which resists it” (*WP*, 656).⁶

So willing power is seeking to encounter and overcome resistance. Given that flourishing is characterized in terms of will to power, an agent flourishes to the extent that she encounters and overcomes resistances. For example, an agent who seeks only minimal resistance, or who fails to overcome modest resistances, is not flourishing. By contrast, an agent who sets herself great resistances and manages to overcome them is flourishing. This is why Nietzsche’s ethical exemplars are individuals such as Goethe, Napoleon, and Beethoven: these are individuals who devote themselves to immensely challenging ends, and nonetheless manage to achieve them.

With this in mind, let’s return to our overriding problem: explaining why flourishing is normatively authoritative. Above, I pointed out that the consistent proponent of modern morality would reject the claim that flourishing is normatively authoritative. If the *Genealogy* is a critique of modern morality, Nietzsche will need some argument to establish that, despite modern morality’s insistence on the contrary point, values and courses of action that undermine flourishing should be rejected.

⁶ For discussions of this idea, see Reginster (2006) and Katsafanas (2011a).

To make the problem vivid, suppose we discover that some cherished value, such as compassion, conflicts with power. Why should that fact constitute an objection to our valuation of compassion? Why not instead view it as an indictment of power? Or why not simply live with the fact that the world is inhospitable to the joint realization of these two values, and strike some sort of compromise, trading a reduction in power for an increase in compassion?

The answer is that power has a privileged normative status – Nietzsche argues that power is the one value to which we are inescapably committed. His argument for this claim is complex, and I lack the space to reconstruct it here. Let me simply summarize the view I have defended elsewhere. Nietzsche argues that we are committed to valuing power precisely because, in aiming at any end at all, we also aim at power. He takes this ineluctable fact about our aim to establish that we must, on pain of contradiction, accept power as a standard of success for action. So power’s privileged normative status is established by its connection to agency. If this is correct, then the fact that a given value conflicts with power is a decisive reason to reject the value.⁷

Thus, Nietzsche is not simply stipulating that flourishing is normatively relevant. Rather, he offers a subtle argument for this claim.

3. A POTENTIAL PROBLEM: IS THE WILL TO POWER THESIS DEVOID OF CONTENT?

If the above reading is correct, then Nietzsche can establish that power has a privileged normative status, and therefore serves as an appropriate standard for revaluation. However, the view faces a problem, which might seem insuperable. To say that we will power is to say that we aim at encountering and overcoming resistances in the course of pursuing other, more determinate ends. So, if we treat will to power as a normative standard, it enjoins us to pursue those ends that generate resistances and obstacles. But this standard seems too vague, too formal, to generate any substantive conclusions.

To see this, consider a pair of opposed, discrete evaluative judgments such as “murder is wrong” and “murder is not wrong.” Which of these judgments would maximize the encountering and overcoming of resistance? There seems to be no satisfactory way of answering this question. Certainly, attempting to murder another person would typically be quite difficult, so perhaps the principle “murder is not wrong” promotes more resistance. On

⁷ For the details, see Katsafanas (2011a).

the other hand, part of the reason why murder is so difficult in our society is that it is strongly disvalued. Thus, one might argue that the valuation "murder is wrong" promotes more resistance for those tempted to murder. A determinate verdict seems unachievable here.

I have chosen a rather simplistic example, in order clearly to illustrate the difficulties with using will to power to assess discrete and context-free evaluative judgments. Of course, most of Nietzsche's examples are far more complex. Take asceticism. If one simply examines a claim such as "asceticism is good," neither it nor its opposite can be assessed simply as an independent, context-free judgment. For both it and its opposite can be dialectically justified in terms of power. In particular, Nietzsche makes it clear that in certain historical circumstances and in certain respects, asceticism is power-maximizing; after all, self-mortification is enormously difficult. It's just that in our time, it has outlived its usefulness and now is power-reducing. However, even these characterizations are insufficiently nuanced: Nietzsche is at pains to point out that certain manifestations of asceticism, such as those present in various philosophers, are actually power-maximizing (*GM*, III, 7-9). So again, it is difficult to see how the injunction to maximize power yields any determinate content.

Simon May draws attention to a deeper version of this difficulty, writing, the problem of defining and measuring "power" would be very great even if it referred simply to efficient force or political control or, in general, stateable "outcomes." But this problem seems insuperable if all human behaviour in its inexhaustible variety, including such activities as knowing and self-discipline, is to be explained in terms of power. . . . Although Nietzsche speaks of value as directly correlated to a "scale of force" (*WP*, 710), it is hard to see what such a common scale of force might be. (May 1999: 27)

According to May, the notion of power is simply too vague and indeterminate to play the role that Nietzsche assigns it.

May's objection appears decisive. He is certainly correct that there is no real way of placing different episodes of willing on a scale of power. As he notes, this would be hard enough if we localize our inquiry to one type of activity: who pursues and overcomes more resistance in writing, Goethe or Melville? That question is baffling, but, as May goes on to note, the question grows even more intractable when applied to activities belonging to different types. The pursuit of great literature, the pursuit of knowledge, the pursuit of athletic prowess, and the pursuit of political power are all difficult, but in quite different ways. They may be incomparable. Who pursues and overcomes more resistance: Gabriel García Márquez or

Stephen Hawking or Lance Armstrong or Barack Obama? It is not clear how one could even begin to answer this question. Consequently, one must concede May's point: we cannot array all actions on a scale, and simply pick the one that overcomes the most resistance.

For all of these reasons, the will to power thesis can seem utterly devoid of content and consequently incapable of generating any determinate normative conclusions. If this is so, then the reading I have advanced is hopeless.

Fortunately, I believe these objections to the will to power thesis can be answered. The *Genealogy* itself shows how. In the following sections, I argue that the *Genealogy* provides us with a way of seeing that although May is perfectly correct that actions cannot be arrayed on a scale of resistance overcome, the will to power standard nonetheless generates determinate conclusions about which values to embrace and which actions to perform.⁸ Moreover, I will argue that by understanding how the will to power standard functions, we will understand why the *Genealogy* takes its historical form.

4. SOLUTION: THE WILL TO POWER THESIS GENERATES DETERMINATE RESULTS WHEN APPLIED TO EVALUATIVE ORIENTATIONS RATHER THAN DISCRETE JUDGMENTS

The above examples indicate that if will to power is to serve as a normative principle, it cannot be brought to bear on discrete, context-free evaluative judgments. But nowhere in the texts does Nietzsche do *that*. On the contrary, he applies the will to power thesis to whole systems of moral judgments, coupled with their associated classes of affects and perceptions. (I will use the term "evaluative orientation" to refer to these systems of judgments, affects, and perceptions.)

Nietzsche constantly reminds us that it is a mistake to think that we can simply isolate particular moral judgments and assess them in a context-free fashion. He writes,

We should admit to ourselves with all due severity exactly *what* will be necessary for a long time to come and *what* is provisionally correct, namely: collecting material, formulating concepts, and putting into order the tremendous realm of tender value feelings and value distinctions [*Wertgefühle und Werthunterschiede*] that live, grow,

⁸ May agrees with a version of this point, arguing that if the will to power thesis is supplemented in certain ways (by Nietzsche's notions of sublimation and form-creation), then it can generate determinate results.

reproduce, and are destroyed – and, perhaps, attempting to illustrate the recurring and more frequent shapes of this living crystallization, – all of which would be a preparation for a *typology* of morals. Of course, people have not generally been this modest. Philosophers have demanded (with ridiculously stubborn seriousness) something much more exalted, ambitious, and solemn as soon as they took up morality as a science: they wanted to furnish the *rational ground* of morality . . . What a distance between this sort of crass pride and that supposedly modest little descriptive project, left in rot and ruin, even though the subtlest hands and senses could hardly be subtle enough for it. (*BGE*, 186)

The task of the moral philosopher is not the examination of discrete moral judgments. It is, instead, the scrutiny of complex systems of affects, distinctions, and tacit moral beliefs. This is evident in Nietzsche's own work. He does not simply present us with a list of direct consequences of his will to power thesis; he does not suggest that one can simply derive various values or their negations from the will to power thesis.⁹ Instead, we must carefully prepare *typologies* of moralities. What would this involve?

Nietzsche sometimes describes this process by claiming that philosophers must apply "a vivisectioning knife directly to the chest of the *virtues of the age*" (*BGE*, 212). The image of vivisection, which occurs several times in Nietzsche's works, suggests that real ethical inquiry does not consist merely in examining the surface content of morality; we don't simply assess the discrete moral judgments preached by the common man, judgments such as "murder is wrong" or "you should help others." Instead, we *cut through* these surface judgments, trying to find the deeper motives, implicit principles, defunct ideals, conceptions of agency, and so forth, that underlie them. We try to understand how these values causally impact our affects and the ways of classifying and distinguishing actions that seem natural to us.

So, part of Nietzsche's point is that morality is not merely present in explicit moral *judgments*. For the particular moral system that the agent embraces will influence not just his explicit thoughts about what is right and wrong, good and bad, but his very perceptions of the world. This is why Nietzsche writes that there "are no experiences other than moral ones, not even in the realm of sense-perception" (*GS*, 114). It is these complex perceptions and evaluative orientations that must be dissected and examined. We go astray, then, in trying to evaluate discrete, context-free actions and moral judgments in terms of will to power.

⁹ On this point, see Katsafanas (2011a).

5. ONE INSTANCE OF THIS APPROACH: HOW PERCEPTIONS OF POWER CAN DIVERGE FROM FACTS ABOUT POWER

Nietzsche's claim that moral critique proceeds by vivisection of evaluative orientations is exceedingly difficult and complex, and I will not attempt anything like a systematic analysis of it here. Instead, I focus on just one aspect: Nietzsche's claim that values influence *our perceptions of our own power*. This is a key element of Nietzsche's attack on the Judeo-Christian moral system: he argues that it systematically obfuscates the connection between perceptions of power and actual power, and thereby undermines actual power. Over the next few sections, I explain and develop this interpretation.

Nietzsche distinguishes *perceptions* or *feelings* of increased power from actual increases in power.¹⁰ David Owen has recently drawn attention to this point. Owen notes that the perception of power can be distorting: one can experience an actual reduction in power as an increase in power, and conversely. In other words, feelings or perceptions of power need not track actual power. As Owen puts it,

(*the degree of*) *the feeling of power* that human beings experience need have no necessary connection to the (*degree of*) *power* expressed. Nietzsche's point is this: because human beings are self-conscious creatures, the feeling of power to which their doings give rise is necessarily mediated by the perspective in terms of which they understand (or misunderstand) themselves as agents and the moral evaluation and ranking of types of action expressed within that perspective. Consequently, an expansion (or diminution) of the feeling of power can be an effect of a change of perspective rather than of an actual increase (or decrease) of the power expressed. (Owen 2007: 34)

In short: the degree to which we experience an act as expressing power depends on our perspective, and in particular on our evaluations.

Consider a homely example. Suppose that I am incapable of defending myself against an aggressive agent. Ordinarily, I would perceive myself as lacking in power. However, suppose I convince myself that submitting to abuse is valuable or meritorious. Then, quite straightforwardly, I provide myself with a way of heightening my sense of power: I can tell myself that I don't refrain from action due to lack of power; I refrain from action precisely because refraining is a greater expression of power.

¹⁰ This is explicitly and succinctly stated in *The Antichrist*, where Nietzsche writes, "what is good? Everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself" (*A*, 2).

Nietzsche draws attention to this point in *GM*, I, 13. There, he asks us to consider what happens "when the oppressed, the downtrodden, the violated say to each other with the vindictive cunning of powerlessness: 'Let us be different from evil people, let us be good.'" In particular, he imagines weak agents who condemn strength, which expresses itself as "a desire to overcome, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs." He writes that in such condemnation, weakness has,

thanks to the counterfeiting and self-deception of powerlessness, clothed itself in the finery of self-denying, quiet, patient virtue; as though the weakness of the weak were itself – I mean its *essence*, its effect, its whole unique, unavoidable, irredeemable reality – a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen, a *deed*, an *accomplishment* ... [This] facilitated that sublime self-deception whereby the majority of mortals, the weak and the oppressed of every kind could construe weakness itself as freedom, and their particular mode of existence as an *accomplishment*. (*GM*, I, 13)

In this passage, Nietzsche suggests that weak agents come to reinterpret their own weakness such that their weakness appears, to them, as strength.¹¹

There are a number of perfectly ordinary examples of this phenomenon. A person of below-average intellect can't become a professor, so he rails against education as liberal effiteness. Or, a person of diminished physical abilities can't participate in competitive athletic endeavors, so he tells himself that only people of impoverished intellect are attracted to sports. I take it that this phenomenon is familiar.

6. HOW JUDEO-CHRISTIAN MORALITY SYSTEMATICALLY (AND, INITIALLY, DELIBERATELY) BREAKS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FEELING OF POWER AND ACTUAL POWER

So there is a distinction between perceived power and actual power, and the agent's values impact the extent to which the former tracks the latter. In this section, I argue that the *Genealogy* reveals ways in which the Judeo-Christian evaluative orientation systematically distorts perceptions of power, inclining us to perceive actual increases in power as reductions in power, and actual decreases in power as increases in power.

Nietzsche singles out three particular ways in which the Judeo-Christian moral system breaks the connection between feeling of power and actual

¹¹ As Aaron Ridley puts it, "the slave has brought a certain kind and amount of suffering under a self-empowering interpretation" (Ridley 1998a: 42).

power. First, the values proposed by the Judeo-Christian system valorize weakness and demonize power. Second, the Judeo-Christian system associates negative emotions with manifestations of actual power and positive emotions with manifestations of actual weakness. Third, it employs a conception of agency that enables the weak to see their weakness as chosen, and hence as strength. I will explain these points in turn.

Start with the first point: the Judeo-Christian moral system operates with a conception of value that valorizes expressions of weakness. Nietzsche catalogues a number of examples:

Weakness is being lied into something *meritorious* ... impotence which doesn't retaliate is being turned into "goodness"; timid baseness is being turned into "humility"; submission to people one hates is being turned into "obedience" ... The inoffensiveness of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed, his standing-by-the-door, his inevitable position of having to wait, are all given good names such as "patience," also known as *the* virtue; not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-wanting-to-take-revenge, it might even be forgiveness ... (*GM*, I, 14)

Actual manifestations of weakness are here reinterpreted as valuable.¹² In attaching positive valuations to states of affairs and events that actually constitute reductions in power, the Judeo-Christian interpretation inclines agents to pursue reductions in power (though not under that description). If the agent accepts these evaluations, the agent can view his manifestations of actual weakness as chosen, and hence as an expression of power.

This brings us to the second point: the Judeo-Christian interpretation associates negative emotions (such as feelings of guilt) with actual expressions of power, thereby discouraging agents from pursuing them. Nietzsche frequently draws attention to this phenomenon, writing that "for too long, man has viewed his natural inclinations with an 'evil eye', so that they finally come to be intertwined with the 'bad conscience' in him" (*GM*, II, 24), and decrying the "sickly mollycoddling and sermonizing, by means of which the animal 'man' is finally taught to be ashamed of all his instincts" (*GM*, II, 7). If expressions of actual power can in these ways be associated with the painful affect of guilt, then agents will be disinclined to pursue the courses of action that constitute increases in actual power.

¹² Consider a few additional examples. The nobles "designate themselves simply by their superiority in power" (*GM*, I, 5), for the typical character traits of the noble are "a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health" (*GM*, I, 7). The noble "conceives the basic concept 'good' by himself, in advance and spontaneously, and only then creates a notion of 'bad' ..." (*GM*, I, 11). By contrast, "slave morality from the outset says No ..." (*GM*, I, 10), to the noble traits, valuing instead their opposites.

The final way in which the Judeo-Christian system distorts the connection between actual power and perceptions of power is by employing a distinctive conception of agency. This requires some explanation. Nietzsche writes,

The reason the subject (or, as we more colloquially say, *the soul*) has been, until now, the best doctrine on earth, is perhaps because it facilitated that sublime self-deception whereby the majority of mortals, the weak and oppressed of every kind could construe weakness itself as freedom, and their particular mode of existence as an *accomplishment*. (*GM*, I, 13)

Here, Nietzsche emphasizes that embracing a particular conception of the subject enables the weak to see their weakness as chosen or meritorious. What is this conception of the subject? Nietzsche explains:

Just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a *deed*, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; "the doer" is invented as an afterthought, – the doing is everything. (*GM*, I, 13)

Consider an alternative: an agent is weak if he performs actions that an observer would characterize as weak. This is a natural conception of agency, a conception that identifies the agent's character with the character of the agent's actions. The Judeo-Christian system severs this connection between the agent's character and the character of the agent's actions, by treating the agent as something separable from and essentially distinct from its deed. If the subject is a characterless will, free to choose as it deems appropriate, then *any* action whatsoever can be interpreted as being chosen out of strength. Even the most craven acts, such as giving up at the first sign of resistance or difficulty, can be seen as not impacting the agent's character: like the gambler who claims that he is not essentially a gambler because he is always free to choose not to gamble, the craven agent can claim that he is not essentially craven, despite performing nothing but (overtly) cowardly actions.¹³

Nietzsche's primary concern is not whether any particular philosopher has overtly embraced this conception of agency. Rather, he is interested in the tacit acceptance of this view by ordinary individuals. If an individual has

¹³ I have in mind Sartre's discussion of the gambler (Sartre 1993: 69–72).

internalized such a view, he will tend to experience his choices and actions in a certain way. In particular, he will tend to experience his actions in a way that breaks the connection between *actual* increases in power and *perceptions* or *feelings* of increased power. For *any* choice whatsoever – the choice to flee from an enemy, the choice to be meek, the choice to reject difficulties – can be interpreted as an expression of power.

In sum, the Judeo-Christian moral system obfuscates the connection between actual power and perceived power in three ways:

- (i) The Judeo-Christian moral system labels as good character traits that tend either to reduce power, or to be typical of those lacking power; similarly, the moral system labels as good those actions that tend to constitute reductions in power. Conversely, the moral system labels as bad character traits that tend to increase power, or to be typical of those possessing power; and it labels as bad those actions that tend to constitute increases in power.
- (ii) The Judeo-Christian system associates negative emotions (such as guilt) with actual expressions of power, hence discouraging agents from pursuing them. Conversely, it associates positive emotions (such as pride) with actual reductions in power, hence encouraging agents to pursue them.
- (iii) Judeo-Christian morality employs a particular conception of agency that enables weak agents to interpret their weakness as freely chosen.

Thus, Judeo-Christian morality comprises a picture of agency, a set of values, and an associated class of emotions that, when taken together, have two effects. First, they lead agents to interpret expressions of *reduced power* as expressions of *increased power*. Second, they incline agents to experience negative affects of *reduced feelings of power* when expressing *actual increases of power*, and positive affects of *increased feelings of power* when expressing *actual reductions in power*. In this sense, the Judeo-Christian morality systematically breaks the connection between perceptions of increased power and actual increases in power.

Additionally, although this will not be essential to our story, in the *Genealogy* Nietzsche claims that this reversal is initially deliberate. The ascetic priests have an intense craving for positions of dominance. Systematically thwarted from achieving dominance by their set of values, they revalue values, such that their own traits are labeled as good (and hence entitle them to dominance) while the traits of the ruling class are labeled as evil (and hence entail that the current rulers should not rule).

7. WHY DO THESE FACTS CONSTITUTE AN OBJECTION TO JUDEO-CHRISTIAN MORALITY?

Suppose this is right: Judeo-Christian morality systematically breaks the connection between perceptions of increased power and actual increases in power. Why should this matter? Why should this be an objection to Judeo-Christian morality?

Above, I mentioned that David Owen has recently emphasized the crucial distinction between feelings of power and actual power. Owen suggests that this distinction plays a foundational role in Nietzsche's evaluation of moral systems:

The criterion of evaluation that Nietzsche proposes is whether the feeling of power expresses and tracks power, where this criterion can be taken to be well grounded just in so far as the principle of will to power provides a compelling explanation of human behavior . . . Hence the crucial question is this: under what conditions does the feeling of power *necessarily* express and track power? (Owen 2007: 35–36)

In other words, Owen interprets Nietzsche as basing his critique on the following principle:

If *X* falsifies the connection between perceptions of power and actual power, then *X* is to be rejected.

Or, perhaps, more generally:

If *X* falsifies our perceptions, *X* is to be rejected.

As Owen notes, the *Genealogy* demonstrates that Judeo-Christian morality fails this test: it does not accurately represent the connection between feeling of power and power. It is thus to be rejected.

For all its insight, Owen's interpretation cannot be correct in claiming that Nietzsche's critique rests on the above principle; the problem cannot simply be one of truth. After all, if modern morality is dear to us, then it is hard to see why the mere fact that it distorts our perception of our own power should be a decisive objection to it. One imagines a contemporary moral philosopher responding to Owen's Nietzsche: "I care far more about such virtues as egalitarianism, compassion, and justice than I care about whether I accurately perceive the extent of my own power." Moreover, Nietzsche himself does not often take the falseness of a perception as a decisive indictment of it; witness his claim that "we do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment" (*BGE*, 4).

However, notice that there is a deeper problem than mere inaccuracy with the misrepresentation of power. The Judeo-Christian system not only misrepresents degrees of power; it also, in part by that very

misrepresentation, strongly disposes us to *decrease* our own power. By associating feelings of increased power with actual reductions in power, it inclines agents to seek out actual reductions in power. Conversely, by associating guilt and other negative emotions with actual increases in power, it strongly disposes agents *not* to seek actual increases in power. Thus, the Judeo-Christian interpretation has the result of reducing actual power.

This is Nietzsche's real objection to modern morality. The problem is not merely that modern morality is inaccurate; the problem is that it is inaccurate in a way that systematically undermines the will to power.

Thus, to recover the context of the quote above: "we do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment . . . The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life" (*BGE*, 4). As Nietzsche emphasizes here (and elsewhere), veridicality is not the primary problem. The primary problem is whether a particular judgment – especially an evaluative judgment – undermines life. And "the essence of life," Nietzsche tells us, is simply "its *will to power*" (*GM*, II, 12).

8. TAKING STOCK

Although Nietzsche's argument is long and complex, we are now in a position to summarize its core quite briefly:

- (1) The Judeo-Christian moral system comprises a set of values, associated emotions, and a conception of agency that jointly incline the agent to perceive reductions in power as increases in power, and increases in power as reductions in power.
- (2) In virtue of the facts cited in (1), Judeo-Christian morality strongly disposes agents to pursue reductions in their own power.
- (3) By (2), Judeo-Christian morality undermines our commitment to power.
- (4) If *X* undermines our commitment to power, *X* is to be rejected.
- (5) Therefore, Judeo-Christian morality is to be rejected.

Or, even more briefly: Judeo-Christian morality is to be rejected because it undermines the will to power.

With this in mind, consider again the objection raised in section 3: will to power cannot be Nietzsche's standard of evaluation, for it does not yield determinate rankings of actions or values. I promised that my reading of the *Genealogy* would explain how this objection could be answered. We can now see why: although the will to power thesis does not enable us to evaluate discrete actions or values, it does allow us to evaluate more general

patterns of behavior and systems of value. Although we cannot rank Melville and Goethe, we can rank a system of values that disposes agents to become Melvilles and Goethes, and a system that disposes them to become the "last man." That is, we can distinguish between systems of values encouraging and valorizing actual expressions of power, and systems of values discouraging and demonizing the same. This is, after all, what Nietzsche's texts display. He shows immense concern with the broad patterns of behavior induced by particular moral systems, and devotes far less time to the examination of discrete moral judgments such as "lying is wrong" or "promises should be kept."

9. WHY NIETZSCHE'S ARGUMENT MUST BE HISTORICAL

Suppose I am correct in arguing that one of the main roles of the *Genealogy* is to show that Judeo-Christian morality systematically distorts the connection between perceptions of power and actual power, and thereby inclines agents to pursue reductions in their own power. This would explain the critical force of the *Genealogy*: the text reveals that modern morality does, indeed, undermine "the highest power and splendor" of mankind, by inclining us to pursue ends that reduce power (while appearing to increase power). Thus, the interpretation fulfills the critical criterion. However, I argued above that an adequate account of the *Genealogy* must also meet the historical criterion, by explaining why Nietzsche's critique takes a historical form. In this section, I show how my reading meets this criterion.

There are two reasons for the text's historical form. First, Judeo-Christian morality's transformation of our drives and affects was gradual and aggregative. Charting these transformations requires examining long stretches of history. Second, in order to display the ways in which Judeo-Christian morality falsifies perceptions of power, Nietzsche needs to employ competing perspectives on manifestations of power.

Let's start with the first point. Nietzsche frequently emphasizes that affects and drives cannot be altered by direct, immediate conscious decisions. Rather, transforming these psychic states takes time:

Drives transformed by moral judgments. — The same drive evolves into a painful feeling of *cowardice* under the impress of the reproach custom has imposed upon this drive: or into the pleasant feeling of *humility* if it happens that a custom such as the Christian has taken it to its heart and called it *good*. That is to say, it is attended by either a good or a bad conscience! In itself it has, *like every drive*, neither this moral character nor any moral character at all, nor even a definite attendant

sensation of pleasure or displeasure: it acquires all this, as its second nature, only when it enters into relations with drives already baptized good or evil or is noted as a quality of beings the people has already evaluated and determined in a moral sense. (*D*, 38)

In this passage, Nietzsche contrasts the ways in which ancient and modern moralities evaluated a particular drive, and he insists that *by evaluating drives in particular ways, moralities gradually transform these drives* (cf. *D*, 35). The selfsame drive, Nietzsche tells us, can manifest itself as humility in one evaluative framework and cowardice in another. Presumably, Nietzsche has in mind a drive to avoid confronting or challenging other agents. In the ancient Greeks, this drive manifested itself as the aversive conscious emotion of cowardice; in us, it manifests itself as the attractive conscious emotion of humility. The former emotion would tend to cause perceptions of reduced power and to disincline agents toward the act in question; the latter, increased power and a propensity toward the act.

One cannot simply turn these affective associations on and off, like a light switch. To see this, consider a more familiar example. Suppose an agent, under the pressure of a religious interpretation, regards manifestations of his sex drive as sinful. When he experiences or acts on sexual urges, he feels guilt, shame, and so forth. However, later in his life this individual consciously rejects his religious upbringing: he becomes a committed atheist. Although the agent consciously pronounces his sex drive perfectly good, and rejects completely the concept of sinfulness, it is natural to assume that he will experience lingering traces of the old evaluation. We can imagine that, without being able to justify it, he still experiences residual shame and negative affects when sexual urges manifest themselves. Such a situation might persist for decades, indeed for his entire life. Ridding oneself of the old evaluations does not immediately transform the emotions associated with the drive. Thus, to understand why the drive manifests itself in a particular way during the individual's atheistic adult life, we will also need to understand his theistic childhood. As Nietzsche puts it, "in the mental realm there is no annihilation" (*KSA*, 12:7[53]).

Or take another example of values gradually transforming affects. Marrying one's first cousin was quite common in the ancient world, and is still widely practiced in certain parts of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. However, most individuals in the United States and Europe view cousin marriage as disgusting or even repellent. We tend to concoct justifications for this emotion. For example, we tell ourselves that cousins who marry are more likely to have children with birth defects. However, this is demonstrably false; cousins are no more likely to have genetically

defective children than non-cousins (Prinz 2007: 240). I suspect that even upon appreciating the falsity of this belief, most individuals in Western societies will continue to view cousin marriage as disturbing or even disgusting. This provides an example of the way in which an evaluative belief – that marrying one's cousin is wrong – gradually generates a variety of affects (disgust, revulsion, etc.), which are resistant to transformation, persisting even in the absence of evidence for the belief.¹⁴

These examples indicate that a change in evaluative judgments does not by itself generate an immediate transformation in affects. Nonetheless, gradual transformations do occur. What causes them?

Presumably, changes in affects arise when the new evaluations are coupled with habituation into new forms of life. This would include the acceptance of new interpretations of what one's affects mean (e.g. interpreting the affect of bad conscience as guilt), new inducements to certain forms of activity (e.g. via religion and custom), and new conceptions of agency and responsibility (e.g. viewing the self as distinct from the deed). These factors, when coupled with the change in evaluative judgments, would gradually reconfigure our affects and drives. And these factors are precisely the ones whose influence Nietzsche's history is designed to uncover: the history both charts the subtle transformations induced in our drives and affects by this complex of factors, and shows that Judeo-Christian morality was responsible for the emergence of these factors. This is the first reason for the text's historical form.

But there is also a second reason. The way in which Judeo-Christian morality undermines power is invisible until we step outside that evaluative framework. When evaluated in its own terms, Judeo-Christian morality appears not to reduce power. After all, this evaluative system tells us to aim at meekness, humility, and the like. Insofar as acting in accordance with one's values is taken to be an exemplary expression of will to power, the adherents of Judeo-Christian morality will not detect any problems with their evaluative system. Analogously, insofar as acting in accordance with one's perceptions of power is taken to be a manifestation of will to power, all will appear to be well.

¹⁴ The reader is invited to try this experiment in a class: ask students whether marrying one's first cousin is wrong. Students almost inevitably say that it is. When asked *why* cousin marriage is wrong, students typically respond by citing the alleged potential for genetic defects. When told that this belief is false, students tend not to revise their moral judgment. Instead, they resort to saying that cousin marriage is revolting or disturbing. Here we have exactly the process that Nietzsche describes: a moral evaluation – based on any superstition, custom, or false belief – generates a strong affect; the affect is then taken to justify the moral evaluation that caused it.

However, history reveals that this perspective is not inevitable. It supplanted a prior perspective, which Nietzsche is at some pains to present as more accurate.¹⁵ Rather than taking Judeo-Christian morality's interpretation of itself as authoritative, then, the history invites us to adopt a more nuanced and potentially more accurate stance.

Thus, there are (at least) two reasons for the text's historical form: Nietzsche needs to chart gradual transformations in drives and affects, and he needs to reveal competing perspectives on manifestations of power.

10. CONCLUSION

According to the reading that I have advanced, the story that Nietzsche tells in the *Genealogy* constitutes a historically grounded critique of modern morality. The history reveals that acceptance of modern morality was causally responsible for producing a dramatic change in our affects, drives, and perceptions. This change caused us to perceive actual increases in power as reductions in power, and actual decreases in power as increases in power. Moreover, it led us to experience negative emotions when engaging in activities that constitute greater manifestations of power, and positive emotions when engaging in activities that reduce power. For these reasons, modern morality strongly disposes us to reduce our own power. Given Nietzsche's argument that power is normatively authoritative, this fact entails that we have decisive reason to reject modern morality.

This interpretation meets the historical and critical criteria: it explains both why the *Genealogy* constitutes a critique of modern morality, and why the history plays an essential role in that critique. The reading also helps us to understand exactly how Nietzsche's normative principle of will to power is to be applied: while the principle is incapable of generating any substantive results when applied to discrete, context-free moral judgments, it does yield results when applied to whole systems of moral evaluations, which are bound up with affective orientations, configurations of perceptions, and so forth.

This is a point with more general applicability. Instead of worrying about whether we can justify claims such as "lying is wrong," "promises should be kept," and the like, Nietzsche enjoins us to concern ourselves with broad features of moral systems – features that manifest themselves only over long

¹⁵ Nietzsche frequently emphasizes the falsification inherent in modern morality. For two examples, see *GM*, I, 10, and I, 13. Of course, these remarks introduce another difficult topic, which is beyond the scope of this paper: how we determine whether one perspective is more accurate than another.

stretches of historical time. These features are completely missed by those who examine merely discrete, particular moral judgments. For, in treating these judgments in isolation from their historical context and ignoring the complex interactions between moral concepts, affects, and perceptions, these thinkers "accept concepts as a gift . . . as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland," rather than recognizing that they are "the inheritance from our most remote, most foolish, as well as most intelligent ancestors," and therefore stand in need of "an absolute skepticism" (*WP*, 409/*KSA*, 11:34[195]). These concepts gradually alter the manner in which we experience and affectively respond to the world, in ways that are invisible until we trace the shifting of affects and evaluations over historical time. For, as Beauvoir puts it in the epigraph to this essay, the world reflects back to us the view that we impose on it. Or, as Nietzsche would add, it does so until, with the help of history, we impose on it a *new* view, and thereby see the contingency of our current evaluative orientation.

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