“Every time a beginning that is calculated to mislead: cool, scientific, even ironic, deliberately foreground, deliberately holding off.”


“The genealogy of morals” is, most famously, a pair of genealogies: that of the good/evil dichotomy in the First Treatise, and that of the bad conscience in the Second Treatise. But the straightforward presentation of these two narratives is subverted even before it begins. Nietzsche classifies the book not as a treatise or inquiry but as a “polemic”; voices interrupt the narrative to insist that much is left unsaid; the narratives are framed by, of all things, reflections on the scientific conscience; Nietzsche declares the entire enterprise to be a contribution to the critique of “the value of values”; the two genealogies of the first two Treatises overlap and various points and ultimately converge in a discussion of the “meaning” of the “ascetic ideal.” Whatever one makes of these complications, two tentative conclusions can be drawn. Nietzsche is profoundly concerned with the status of his genealogy. And genealogy does not function as reportage, primarily concerned with the accurate depiction of events; rather, it aims to reveal something about the status of “moral values” and the possibility of an alternative to them.

**PREFACE**

In *P2* Nietzsche declares “the origin of our moral prejudices” – note that he does not say “your” moral prejudices – to be the subject matter of his polemic, but a more profound indication of the subject matter comes with the first words: “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowing ones”(*P1*).

“We,” according to Nietzsche, are much like Oedipus, knowing ones who fail to know their own selves. Our case is different from that of Oedipus, however. It is not the ability of an exceptional individual that is at issue in our case, and it is not so specific an intellectual talent as the ability to solve riddles. Rather, we are all knowing ones, and this has completely transformed our lives. As the heirs of Enlightenment, we have liberated ourselves from the superstitions of the past, and gained new abilities to predict and control natural phenomena. These changes have been so violent and so comprehensive that our identity has become a function of our knowingness. But despite all our knowledge, according to Nietzsche, we remain ignorant of ourselves.

Nietzsche suggests two reasons why we fail to know ourselves. One is our specific failure to understand ourselves as historical beings. The metaphor in *P1* is of someone failing to count the strikes of a tolling bell until after they have gone. We are too engrossed in the immediate present
to take a retrospective view until it has become inaccessible to us. The past perpetually recedes even as it maintains its power to shape who we are; even the significance of our present thoughts is inaccessible to us without a stock-taking that we have never carried out. This is the other reason why we have failed to know ourselves: we have never tried.

Nietzsche further suggests that this self-knowledge is not on a par with our knowledge of, say, biology or physics; rather, in an invocation of Matthew, it is “where [our] treasure is”(P1). Self-knowledge, and in particular the historical self-knowledge that genealogy furnishes, is not important instrumentally (to build a better mousetrap, as it were), and not “for its own sake,” but, says Nietzsche, as a matter of the heart. “As winged creatures and honey-gatherers of the spirit” (P1; emphasis added), self-knowledge is important to us in a way that nothing material could be; our well-being is threatened if we fail to know who we are. Nietzsche thus identifies the compellengness of his particular project as its source in a “fundamental will of knowledge that commands from the depths”(P2). The immense bodies of knowledge that we have accumulated have no bearing on the important questions of our existence. But our demand for self-knowledge “grow[s] out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears its fruit”(P2): it is organically connected to the conditions of our flourishing.

Genealogy contributes to the enterprise of self-knowledge by answering these questions: “under what conditions did humankind invent the value judgments good and evil? And what value do those values themselves possess? Have they inhibited or promoted human flourishing so far”(P3). Nietzsche acknowledges that the importance of this set of questions is counterintuitive. There doesn’t seem to be any question here, let alone one of comprehensive importance. So Nietzsche explains his approach in this way. He used to look for “the origin of evil behind the world”(P3), as if evil were something that existed completely apart from human practices, which one needs resort to metaphysics or theology in order to explain. But “historical and philological schooling”(P3) taught him to see evil not as a fundamental feature of existence, but as a category invented by human beings. This provokes the questions of why it was invented, what human ends does having such a category serve, and, most importantly, whether or not we are better off making sense of our lives in terms of such a category. Nietzsche claims, further, that the notions of evil, pity, and morality have joined to form a comprehensive whole outside of which it has become nearly impossible to think. So the task that Nietzsche sets for himself is not a veridical assessment of moral values, nor a moral assessment of moral values, but an evaluation of values: some kind of inquiry that looks at rival schemes or systems of values and determines what the worth of such evaluative systems are. And this worth is to be determined not along moral lines, but in terms of what best promotes human strength, health, fulfillment, or, most simply, “life.” Nietzsche’s suggestion is, of course, that the future of humanity might be better served with values other than moral ones.

**FIRST TREATISE: “GOOD AND BAD,” “GOOD AND EVIL”**

The main subject of this treatise is the explanation of the invention of the good/evil dichotomy. But the treatise begins, oddly with a discussion of the “English psychologists”(I.1). One might expect Nietzsche to sympathize with them: they explain the origin of values as not supernatural,
but as the product of natural drives and forces. But Nietzsche finds them both boring and
perverse. Their explanations are deeply misguided, stemming a dull, presupposed method rather
than from historical fact. And they seem not only to be incidentally undermining our own
idealized self-image with their biological and mechanistic explanations, but they seem to be
doing so with a perverse zeal: they look “for what is decisive in development exactly where the
intellectual pride of humanity least wished to find it”(I.1), with an apparent eye to self-
belittlement.

Nietzsche gives little indication as to why this discussion belongs here, except for mentioning
that these psychologists, as the only other genealogists of morals, are his closest rivals. But his
discussion raises some fundamental issues. Nietzsche, after claiming that the psychologists’
books are boring, asks, “what do they really want?” This is the basic question which Nietzsche
poses as “psychologist,” and which informs his interpretive approach: the significance of a moral
scheme, for Nietzsche, turns not on the quality of the reasons it presents but on what end is
served through commitment to such a scheme. Another fundamental issue raised here is the
importance of science and scientific explanations. Nietzsche later argues that, for all the power
and authority that science commands, it is nevertheless useless with respect to settling what our
most basic commitments should be. Another issue arises with Nietzsche’s mention of
Christianity and Plato: that of the value of truth. According to Nietzsche, the central feature of
both positions is “optimism,” the belief that truth will be liberating. But, Nietzsche insists, truth
might turn out to be “unfavorable, unchristian, immoral”(I.1).

The story of the origin of the good/evil is, in its outline, quite simple.

The beginning of all values is nothing well-considered or well-reasoned, but rather the
spontaneous self-affirmation of nobles. These nobles merely feel themselves to be superior –
they experience an unreflective “pathos of distance”(I.2) – and this feeling serves as the basis for
their self-ascription as powerful, strong healthy, and, above all, good. Although such nobles
could hardly articulate any clear sense of this, they would consider themselves “good” in much
the same way that a good sword or a good horse is good: they are the finest examples of human
beings. Such an ascription involves no reference to anyone else, and indeed, these nobles are so
generally indifferent to non-nobles that the very idea of justifying themselves would be alien to
them. The “bad” are those who fail to be good, and so merely an “after-creation”(I.11). The
center of ethical concern lies with one’s one superiority, and this can make for apparently
cildish values.

One could identify a number of intermediate stages, but the fundamental shift comes with the
“slave revolt in morality”(I.10). Those incapable of acting on their hostility – that is, the “bad” –
develop, out of “this cauldron of unsatiated hate”(I.11) *ressentiment*. “Ressentiment” (Nietzsche
uses the French word that one might translate “resentment”) seems to be a feeling produced in
reaction to a “hostile and external world”(I.10); it is thus, perhaps, the experience of hostility,
injury, and impotence. This one sentiment consumed the psychic lives of those who suffered or
feared suffering. Their lives came to revolve around feelings of malice toward the nobles, and
dominate their sense of what was important. In just this way the very powerlessness of the weak
allowed them a means of resistance to the value judgments of the nobles. Their inability to act
compelled them to seek and exact “imaginary revenge.” This is not to say that they imagined
themselves to have exacted revenge whenever they could not. Rather, where they could not exact revenge “in deed,” they exacted a novel sort of revenge. The revenge operated primarily on an “ideal” or “spiritual” level rather than a factual one. The noble and the man of ressentiment would agree for the most part on who was who and what had transpired. Those filled with ressentiment retaliated by imagining that precisely the characteristics by which the nobles identified themselves were the undesirable ones, and that they themselves were the virtuous ones: they looked at the same facts but “dyed in another color, interpreted in another manner, seen in another way”(I.11). The imaginary revenge of ressentiment is first and foremost “an inversion of the value-positing eye”(I.10).

So, claimed Nietzsche, “The slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values”(I.10). The weak invert the nobles’ value judgments by calling “the nobles, the powerful, the masterful”(I.11) “evil,” and calling themselves, by contrast, “good.” The “good” of the noble morality are thus precisely those who are “evil” in the slave morality: they are careless of others and prone to fits of violence. And the new “goodness” comprises, rather than overflowing strength, meekness and humility. Nietzsche later refers to slave morality – or simply “morality” – as “anti-nature”(I.16): such values are contrived, and contrived in such a way as to contravene instinctive and affective health.

Nietzsche identifies the slave revolt as the product of post-exilic Judaism, and in particular with Christianity, which he accordingly identifies as the apotheosis of the ressentiment-values that post-exilic Judaism invented. Nietzsche also identifies the slave morality as our morality: although “there is still no shortage of places where the struggle rages on indecisively”(I.16), “Rome,” the symbol of noble values, “is without any doubt defeated”(I.16). (A contrast between ancient Greek values and Christian morality would be true to Nietzsche, and might serve the purposes of IH better.)

Note that, according to Nietzsche, a full understanding of slave morality requires a historical account: one needs to see it, in its context, as a reaction to the noble morality provoked by hostile conditions.

Nietzsche is often taken as championing the nobles’ values. But that does not seem to be his purpose here; he seems more interested in understanding “our” values that in praising theirs. And he is clear-sighted about the nobles’ shortcomings: they are stupid and uninteresting, and, above all, they failed. The noble morality could not sustain itself. So if the “‘tame human,’” as Nietzsche would have the ideal of slave morality, “has already learned how to feel himself as goal and summit, as meaning of history, as ‘higher human’ . . . ,” that is in part because “he even has a certain right to feel that way . . . he is at least still capable of living, at least still says Yes to life . . .”(I.11). If Nietzsche has already begun to criticize slave morality here, it is not because of its slavishness per se, or because of some aesthetic judgment about its ideal, but because, as a result of its victory, “we suffer from humanity”(I.11): its victory has been costly for us all, in particular because what admiration for the human that we were capable of has been replaced by self-aversion.
SECOND TREATISE: “GUILT,” “BAD CONSCIENCE,” AND SO FORTH

The basic narrative of the Second Treatise is not complex. The “fundamental moral concept” (II.4), guilt, has its origin in the non-moral notions of debt and indebtedness. Human beings first measured themselves against one another through the creditor-debtor relationship; creditors inevitably suffered losses; making the debtor suffer would compensate for these losses; communities came to understand themselves as debtors in relation to their ancestors and their gods (this section, II.19, is omitted); and finally guilt and duty are “turned backwards” (II.21) (or “internalized,” II.16) into the “bad conscience,” making a final discharge of the creditor-debtor relationship impossible and creating the moral self-torment of humanity.

The story of the origin of the bad conscience is not compelling in every detail; indeed, commentators have found inconsistencies at various junctures. But it does provoke a pair of interesting considerations. First, it is remarkable that some such phenomenon as the bad conscience would exist at all. Whether or not the bad conscience has the origin and the psychology that Nietzsche attributes to it, that we have some faculty of internalized self-harm seems indisputable. Some such faculty would seem to be necessary to explain how we can take remote, abstract, or immaterial concerns – from politics to grades to love to religion – so seriously, and yet it seems fantastic that animals lacking the bad conscience would take the trouble to cultivate a faculty of self-harm. The second and related point is how remarkably productive the bad conscience seem to be. The bad conscience and its related phenomena, according to Nietzsche, are not merely at the root of misery and self-torment, but have contributed to memory, and thereby consciousness, responsibility, narrative, and purpose, and thereby reason, freedom, the “sovereign individual,” and ideals in general.

The shift from the First Treatise to the Second Treatise is thus a shift from what we esteem to our labor on ourselves. The story of the bad conscience is thus less one of a particular psychological faculty than one of how we have made ourselves “calculable, regular, necessary” (II.1), separating ourselves profoundly from the other animals. We have, for better and for worse, transformed ourselves from creatures that relied on unconscious instinct to creatures that have concerns more powerful than even that of self-preservation, including concerns about what we ourselves are. “The soul – the whole inner world – first arises” (II.16) through the “anti-natural” (II.24 inter alia) ideals that the bad conscience established.

The Second Treatise begins with what perhaps seems to be a marginal concern: “to breed an animal with the prerogative of making promises” (II.1). But Nietzsche takes this one “task” as representative of a general issue: how it is that we, as natural beings, whose functioning is perhaps most efficient without memory, consciousness, or conscience, have nevertheless achieved all the mental capacities that have become our distinction. Nietzsche’s discussion in this section is interesting for several reasons. He seems to propose a political model of consciousness, reminiscent of Plato and anticipatory of Freud, that also incorporates materialist and functionalist elements. Nietzsche also proposes one account of the significance that memory takes on: “a genuine memory of the will: so that between the original ‘I want,’ ‘I’ll do it’ and the actual discharge of the will, its act, a world of strange new things, circumstances, and even acts of will can be safely interposed without breaking this long chain of will” (II.1). Memory is, in part, that which allows our actions to be about more than the imperatives of immediate
circumstance. Memory makes it possible for an action to be about remote events and concerns and thus be, for example, the fulfillment of a promise or the exacting of revenge. And memory, Nietzsche also claims here, contributes to the intellectual abilities required for “self-representation.” Being able to take oneself as an object in this way turns out to be especially productive, through its effect on our self-assessments, our actions, and our self-manipulations.

Nietzsche adds that memory, in its origins, is not merely a new skill acquired by essentially unchanged beings. Rather, “the human being itself must have become calculable, regular, necessary”(II.1) in order for the complex of intellectual abilities surrounding memory to be developed. We must shape ourselves into historical beings, for whom the past and the future are relevant to our identities, and this requires uniformity and predictability. And this concerns not merely to our purely intellectual capacities, but also to our moral capacities. Memory and the self-transformations that it is contingent upon are part of “the long history of the origin of responsibility”(II.2), which is in turn the basic element of “freedom”(II.2), responsibility for one’s actions and for oneself. Nietzsche depicts the developments that led up to freedom as not being a conscious process. Instead, “the actual labor of the human being on itself”(II.2) first took the form of rigid adherence to habit and custom. The process by which human beings made themselves more predictable and uniform paradoxically culminates in “the sovereign individual”(II.2), however. Behind this reversal, the “dominating instinct”(II.2) at the bottom of one’s power over oneself, is, oddly enough, conscience.

Just in case the “ethicality of custom and the social straightjacket”(II.2) do not seem repressive enough, Nietzsche further emphasizes that the process of self-creation is not an easy one. The physical processes by which we destroy our animal instincts and make ourselves capable of taking things seriously, which Nietzsche places under the rubric of “mnemotechnics”(II.3), are painful ones. The role of pain, in fact, is both central and universal: all of our higher faculties depend on a process that is horrifyingly cruel. This claim, for Nietzsche, has two main implications. One is that to understand fully all of our deepest commitments and the basic features of our modern self-understanding, we must, to some extent, see them as resulting from a long process governed by irrational forces. There is a pre-history to our commitments that remains, in some manner, present in them: “the past, the longest, deepest, harshest past breathes on us and swells up in us whenever we become ‘serious’”(II.3). The other main implication is that this pre-history was centrally violent and painful: “Ah, reason, seriousness, mastery over the affects, this whole gloomy thing called reflection, all these privileges and showpieces of humanity: how dearly have they been bought! How much blood and cruelty is at the bottom of all “good things”!…(II.3) The creation of our moral personality was accomplished through a process that our moral personality could not have endured.

The process must begin, according to Nietzsche, with a non-moral concept: “the fundamental moral concept ‘guilt’ has its origin in the very material concept of ‘debts’”(II.4). This genealogy is more dubious than that of the First Treatise: locating the source of all moral evaluation specifically in the concept of indebtedness seems less credible than the basic claim of the First Treatise, that the moral dichotomy of good and evil largely replaced the prior dichotomy of good and bad through the achievement of “imaginary revenge.” But perhaps we can say this much: that some sort of psychological phenomenon, such as guilt, historically lies at the bottom of the entire complex of moral evaluation, and that it could not have come from moral evaluation.
Nietzsche gives the example of punishment. The moral practice of punishment, as the appropriate penalty for a freely-chosen act of intentional wrongdoing, must have been preceded by a more primitive practice in which harm is inflicted on those perceived to be inimical. There must be some practice with its own non-moral logic that preceded moral practices. According to Nietzsche, this practice is that of lending and borrowing. It provided the conceptual framework that, when suitably transformed, served as the framework for moral evaluations and in this way, perhaps, helped furnish our moral psychology.

The creditor-debtor relationship was suited for its role in the prehistory of guilt for two main reasons. One is that “this was the first manifestation of person coming against person, of one person measuring himself against another person” (II.8) So this, according to Nietzsche, is where human beings first learned to understand who they were in terms of their relations to others. And this is where they learned to put a price on themselves: “Setting prices, measuring values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging – this preoccupied the oldest thoughts of humanity to such an extent that it constitutes, in a certain sense, what thinking is . . . .” (II.8) So creditor-debtor relationship becomes important not only because it introduces an interpersonal aspect into considerations of what one oneself is, but also because it provides a metric; it furnishes objective terms in which the subjective can think of itself. The more important reason, however, is that the creditor-debtor relationship provides a model for the exacting of payment where no payment can be made. On Nietzsche’s account, the notion of punishment is fundamentally important to the development of morality, and before there could be punishment for the sake of justice, there must have been punishment for its own sake. Violation, such as that of a credit agreement, was accompanied by the idea of “an equivalence between harm and pain” (II.4): so one can inflict suffering as compensation for an unpaid debt. But this is only possible if a feature of primal human psychology obtains: that cruelty, “making suffer” (II.6), is a “genuine festival” (II.6), “an extraordinary counterpleasure” (II.6). Nietzsche offers this as a “speculation” (II.6): that there is a joy in cruelty, and this delight in making suffer lies at the root of most, if not all, of our practices.

In Section 12 of the Second Treatise, Nietzsche interrupts his genealogy for some methodological considerations. Nietzsche seems to offer these methodological considerations as anticipating the objections to his account that the process was never intended to be structured in the way that he describes, and that those who have entered into the process certainly do not see themselves as entering into a long history of cruelty. Nietzsche shrugs off these potential objections, however. His argument is that the meaning or purpose of a historical process need not have any connection either to the intentions of its original participants, or to the conscious intention of its current participants; he presents his historiographical approach in terms of this “important proposition” (II.12): “the cause of the origin of a thing and its final utility, actual employment, and place in a system of purposes lie worlds apart; that something existing, having somehow come-into-being, is always again and again appropriated by a power superior to it and interpreted from new viewpoints, reorganized and redirected toward a new use; that everything that happens in the organic is an overcoming, a becoming master, and on the other hand that all overcoming and becoming master is a new-interpreting, a preparation in which the prior “meaning” and “purpose” must necessarily be obscured or entirely obliterated” (II.12).

Teleology is always retrospective, since purposiveness is something imposed by the most recent power-relation rather than the original or an intermediate one. What governs processes is not the fulfillment of an antecedent purpose, but the appropriation of existing means for the sake of
satisfying immediate demands. A long process is accordingly, on Nietzsche’s account, never a unified chain of continuous progress toward a single goal, but a “succession of ... more or less mutually independent processes of overcoming” (II.12). And since the unity of a historical narrative is a function of its directionality, and the directionality is a function of its most authoritative appropriation rather than any antecedent feature, originally disparate phenomena can come to count as a unity, and originally significant features can come not to count.

By this point, Nietzsche has only identified indebtedness as the conceptual ancestor of guilt, and claimed that guilt is the foundational concept for morality; he has yet to explain how the transformation from debt to guilt was accomplished, and how guilt came to serve such a comprehensive function. The notion of the “bad conscience,” later parenthetically defined as “cruelty directed backwards” (III.20), is central to Nietzsche’s explanation.

There are three main steps in Nietzsche’s explanation; the first is “internalization.” According to Nietzsche, “all instincts that cannot be discharged externally direct themselves back inward” (II.16). The major advent for this phenomenon arises with the pressures for socialization and urbanization – when humanity “found itself definitively closed up inside the confines of society and of peace” (II.16). In order for a social order to be maintained, individuals’ aggressive and violent instincts, in particular, needed to be repressed. But these repressed instincts did not die away; they found permissible outlets by turning themselves back against “the possessor of such instincts” (II.16). The human animal “driven into the narrowness and regularity of custom, impatiently tearing himself apart, persecuting, gnawing at, tormenting, and abusing himself” (II.16) is accordingly the origin of the bad conscience: the instinctive joy in cruelty vented upon oneself. This cruelty would seldom take an outward form; the instincts would find a more subtle, and more socially acceptable, release in an inner self-torment. The invention of the bad conscience thus brings about the “‘internalization’ of humankind: with this that which is later called its ‘soul’ first arises” (II.16). The bad conscience had its origin in an external cause, urbanization and the enforcement of a social order repressing humanity’s most powerful instincts, but immediately becomes a violent self-separation from the instincts. The violence of the bad conscience comes to be directed against the instincts, even against itself, and this opens up an inner world that had been filled exclusively by instincts and drives: any sort of reflection or concern can be violently interposed between instinct and will. With the inventor of the bad conscience, accordingly, “the greatest and most uncanny sickness was instituted, one from which humankind has not yet recovered, humanity’s suffering of humanity, of itself: as the result of a violent separation from its animal past, a leap and a plunge into new situations and conditions of existence, a declaration of war against the old instincts on which, until that point, its force, joy, and terribleness had rested” (II.16). The bad conscience institutes a radical break to a kind of existence completely different from the one that had preceded it, or indeed from anything else at all; but this new existence, however full of novel possibilities, is nevertheless an “uncanny sickness.”

The next main step is that of the “moralization of the concepts of guilt and duty, their push back into the bad conscience” (II.21). These concepts become “moralized” when they become “internalized”: instead of being considered exclusively in terms of concrete, outward transgressions and punishments, they become significant in terms of the inflictions and sufferings of the bad conscience. This is the bridge between “debt” and “guilt.” The human
relation of creditor-debtor is transposed on to the relation between ancestor or god and human being, and eventually the generalized feeling of indebtedness towards ancestors and gods becomes the perception of duty and self-in infliction of guilt. Guilt and duty can in this way take on an existence independent of any social observation or pressure: once internalized, they become self-generated and self-enforced.

The final step is that such guilt becomes “irredeemable”(II.21). The belief or faith in God or one’s ancestors gradually diminishes, relieving the feeling of indebtedness and thus portending the end of the internal self-torment of humanity. But with the moralization of guilt and duty, “the very prospect of a final, once-and-for-all discharge is … pessimistically closed off”(II.21). Instead of guilt and duty being conceived of in terms of a specific relationship of indebtedness, the “concepts ‘guilt’ and ‘duty’” are “turned backwards . . . first against the ‘debtor’ . . . but eventually . . . against the creditor, too”(II.21). The bad conscience can attach a feeling of guilt to the mere relational positions of debtor and creditor; and since the feeling of guilt is not grounded in anything in particular, the possibility of anything that would suffice to relieve can be eliminated. Humans can produce their own endless guilt through such “explanatory expedient[s]”(II.21) as original sin and “God sacrificing himself for the guilt of humankind”(II.21).

Nietzsche concludes (leaving aside the omitted section II.25) the Second Treatise with some unanswered questions about the status of his discussion and, more importantly, the status of the ideals whose origin he had recounted. The first unanswered question is “What are you really doing, erecting an ideal or knocking one down?”(II.24) The unexpressed answer might be “both”: Nietzsche goes on to argue that any new ideal is built out of the ruins of an old one: “So that a sanctuary could be constructed, a sanctuary had to be destroyed: that is the law – show me the case in which it is not fulfilled! . . . .”(II.24) So the process of creating a new ideal necessarily involves knocking down the old one. This process will be especially severe for us, however, since we ourselves have become inseparable from our ideals: “We moderns, we are the heirs of the conscience-vivisection and animal-self-cruelty of millennia: this is our longest practice, our artistry perhaps, or in any case our refinement, our discriminating palate. Humankind has treated its natural inclinations with an ‘evil eye’ for so long that it has finally become inseparable from the ‘bad conscience’”(II.24). Nietzsche does not explicitly condemn this situation, and this reticence seems to be part of his considered position (“at this point it is only appropriate for me to be silent,” II.25, omitted). But it nevertheless seems clear that Nietzsche looks forward to the supercession of the situation that he describes. He even gives a name, “great health”(II.24), to his counter-ideal, and provides a brief sketch of what it requires: “To attach, that is, the bad conscience to all the unnatural inclinations, all those aspirations toward the Beyond, anti-sensual, anti-instinctual, anti-natural, anti-animal ideals, in short all the ideals there have ever been, all hostile-to-life and world-slandering ideals.”
THIRD TREATISE: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ASCETIC IDEALS?

Nietzsche, in the Third Treatise, still makes use of his tropes of objectivity: he still claims, for example to “set out the facts of the matter”(III.13). But one can see from the start that the form of his discussion has changed; matters of direct practical significance finally emerge out of the historical issues of what happened when. He begins with what turns out to be an immensely open-ended question, “What do ascetic ideals mean?”(III.1) And the ensuing discussion takes up and transforms the previous two genealogies into seemingly urgent reflections on such things as “the fundamental fact of human will”(III.1), “the law of the necessary ‘self-overcoming’ in the essence of life”(III.27), and whether “the will itself”(III.28) has been and can still be “saved”(III.28); all these issues are, strangely, related to the question of “What is the meaning of all will to truth?”(III.27).

The basic narrative is, once again, simple. “The priest”(III.15) tends to his sickly flock, which is suffering from “degenerating life”(III.13) or “physiological inhibition and fatigue”(III.13), by administering the ‘guilty’ kind” of “priestly medication”(III.21). That is to say, the priest encourages the “feeling of guilt”(III.20) to an “ecstatic”(III.21) degree, so that it provokes an “orgy of feeling”(III.19, omitted), which temporarily alleviates suffering. In order to accomplish this, the priest “changes the direction of ressentiment”(III.15): he convinces his suffering flock that someone is to blame for their suffering, but then tells them “you alone are to blame for yourself”(III.15). Having turned the people’s impotent, vengeful hostility against them, the priest succeeds in providing an explanation for their suffering, and this “expedient”(III.13) provides them with some comfort. But the self-blame induced by the priest produces the “ascetic ideal”(passim), which not only promotes ascetic practices, but promotes ends precisely because they are self-abnegating. The ascetic ideal gives purpose to those who would otherwise suffer from its lack, but gradually “makes them sicker”(III.21), and therefore demands greater asceticism to serve its purpose, and therefore makes them sicker still. This process of intensifying ascetic cruelty advances until it culminates in “nihilism”: after having given up more and more for the sake of finer and finer subtleties, there was nothing left to do but give up everything for the sake of nothing. The ascetic ideal finally turns against itself, taking away even its own expedient, so that nothing appears to be left. Modern science offers itself as a potential replacement for the ascetic ideal, but turns out to be its most extreme form.

This story of the genesis, flourishing, and seemingly endless death throes of the ascetic ideal takes its importance from the existential questions that Nietzsche anchors in it, however. By framing his inquiry in terms of what ascetic ideals mean, Nietzsche identifies his primary concern as what significance our lives, and what we have made of ourselves, have taken on, and he further identifies a problem. The self-distance in the soul opened up by the bad conscience has let everything and nothing enter: ascetic ideals can mean all too many things, and all this ultimately amounts to a lack of meaningfulness. We have exhausted the resources for generating new meanings for our lives, and Nietzsche, despite his diagnosis of the problem, sees no obvious solution. Something eventful has taken place for us to be able to pose these questions to ourselves at all, but, at least according to Nietzsche, we must still work out our unresolved historical inheritance of millennia of cruelty before we can see what will provide us with new goals.
Nietzsche begins the genealogy of this treatise with the description of a peculiar phenomenon that he categorizes as “ascetic life” (III.11). Within the IH syllabus we can find manifestations of this phenomenon in Plato (especially *Phaedo*, *Republic*), the New Testament, and the *Bhagavad Gita*: that natural human existence is treated as intrinsically worthless, ruined by transience or the corruption of matter. Some “entirely different kind of existence” (III.11) is then posited and esteemed, and ascetic practice is called for, either to make earthly existence as much as possible like the other kind, or to render it “a bridge to that other kind” (III.11) by redeeming mistakes or correcting errors.

The remarkable thing about this phenomenon is that “such a monstrous mode of evaluation does not stand inscribed as an exception case or a curiosity in the history of humankind: it is one of the most widespread and enduring facts” (III.11). The ascetic priest is everywhere in human history, despite not having had particularly favorable conditions to thrive. So, according to Nietzsche, “it must be in the *interest of life itself* that such a type of self-contradiction does not die out” (III.11); ascetic life must serve some important function. The “ascetic ideal” (III.13 inter alia) is accordingly called an “expedient” (III.13), or “a gambit for the preservation of life” (III.13).

The ascetic ideal seems to serve its function by providing an explanation of the meaningfulness of life, and in particular the meaning of suffering. According to Nietzsche, “every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering” (III.15), and the ascetic ideal, through the concept of “sin” (III.21), furnishes an especially durable and generally applicable explanation: the sufferer is to blame for his own suffering. The ascetic priest tells the sufferer that, “he should look for [his suffering] in himself, in his guilt, in a bit of the past, he should understand his suffering itself as a *condition of punishment*” (III.20). This is false, but effective in relieving a certain kind of suffering, and also amazingly productive, since it provides the impetus for its own acceleration: it ultimately causes more suffering, which it in turn explains, which causes more suffering, and so on. The amazing effectiveness of the ascetic ideal leads Nietzsche to say that the invention of sin qualifies as “the greatest event in the history of the sick soul” (III.20) and that here “any word of criticism is too much” (III.21).

One can inquire as to what, apart from its universality, explains why the ascetic ideal has “opposing ideal” (III.23) at present. Nietzsche seems to argue that its comprehensiveness serves the ascetic ideal in this regard: it is able to coopt or absorb any potential rival in part because it offers an evaluation of *everything*, leaving no domain in which it does not assert its authority. But the most interesting aspect of Nietzsche’s account here is that the ascetic ideal’s awesome power is one of interpretation: “it interprets times, peoples, persons inexorably in light of this One Goal; no other interpretation, no other goal counts; it rejects, denies, affirms, confirms according only to the meaning of its interpretation” (III.23). The ascetic ideal can thus function as “closed system of will, goal, and interpretation” (III.23): it forms a systematic unity which allows it to subsume any opposition.

“Modern science” (III.23) initially appears to provide a challenge to the ascetic ideal, since it dispels the ascetic ideal’s religious interpretation of existence: it has “gotten along so far without God, the Beyond, or negating virtues” (III.23). But, according to Nietzsche, modern science turns out to be the ascetic ideal’s most “severe,” “esoteric” (III.27) form. This is so because
science takes away all the comforting illusions that the ascetic ideal provided, leaving behind only the self-abnegating faith in a true world behind the world of appearance. The only ideal that science leaves untouched is the “faith in truth”(III.24), and just this is the “core”(III.27) of the ascetic ideal: the blind positing of some reality from which we are deeply estranged, in which our well-being is thought to reside, even though it may be something terrible. Accordingly, says Nietzsche, “the value of truth must be experimentally called into question”(III.24).

Nietzsche depicts modern science as the product of Christianity destroying itself: in particular, “the concept of truthfulness”(III.27) contained in Christian morality comes to be taken so seriously that it turned against itself. “In such a way,” says Nietzsche, “did Christianity as a dogma perish by its own morality; in just this way must Christianity as a morality now perish, too – we stand at the threshold of this event”(III.27). The ascetic ideal has robbed itself of belief, leaving only empty ascetic practice, but this, too, will eventually collapse. But even though the ascetic ideal has turned against itself, leaving nothing of itself behind, even though its complete self-destruction is imminent, there remains no clear way out. After claiming that the ascetic ideal coopts every ideal – even that no other ideal has ever existed – Nietzsche unhelpfully suggests that “comedians of this ideal”(III.27) might be capable of harming it. The ascetic ideal nevertheless stands for now as “the only meaning so far”(III.28). It has been the only explanation for suffering, the only interpretation of human existence, and thus, even though a “will to nothingness”(III.28), the great expedient for saving “the will”(III.28). As the most courageous animals, human beings could stand suffering as long as they had a reason for it, and the ascetic ideal offered reasons; it provided a sense of purpose by which to direct our agency. So the successor to the ascetic ideal must supply all this, as “the human being would rather will nothingness than not will”(III.28)
The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche’s most sustained critique of morality, exhibits such an original approach to value theory that many readers feel lost in the whirlpool of his ideas, and grapple for some solid ground from which to evaluate him. Surely much if not all of Nietzsche’s ideas are complex, and many readers feel lost in the whirlpool of his ideas. However, if we take a closer look at his ideas, we may find that they are not as complex as they seem.

Despite the difficulty of understanding Nietzsche’s ideas, many people have been attracted to his philosophy. Despite his criticism of morality, many people have been attracted to his philosophy. In particular, the Genealogy of Morals has been influential in the development of post-modernist thought. This is in part due to the efforts of Walter Kaufmann, who has been influential in the de-Nazification of Nietzsche’s reputation.

The Genealogy of Morals is helpfully situated within Nietzsche’s wider philosophy, and occasional interludes examine supplementary topics that further enhance the reader’s understanding of the text. Two chapters examine how the Genealogy relates to standard questions in moral and political philosophy. In this paper, I sketch out a new interpretation of the Second Essay of On the Genealogy of Morality by showing that its seemingly meandering character conceals a highly cogent structure. In contrast to the prevalent scholarly trend, I argue that the ideal of sovereignty Nietzsche introduces in the essay’s opening sections plays an integral and crucial role in his account of the emergence of the feeling of moral guilt. The genealogy of morals is, most famously, a pair of genealogies: that of the good/evil dichotomy in the First Treatise, and that of the bad conscience in the Second Treatise. But the straightforward presentation of these two narratives is subverted even before it begins. Nietzsche classifies the book not as a treatise or inquiry but as a “polemic”; voices interrupt the narrative to insist that much is left unsaid; the narratives are framed by, of all things, reflections on the scientific conscience; Nietzsche declares the entire enterprise to be a contribution to the critique of the value