

Nietzsche's Psychology of Morality and Religion

Primary Sources:

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Sections 108-109, 125, 343 (Handout)

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sections 186-187, 198-200, 260-262, in Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 287-290, 299-302, 394-402

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Sections 1-6, 8-11, 16-21, 23-25, in Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 493-503, 506-512, 520-528, 529-532

Background:

From the *Routledge Online Encyclopedia*:

[**For the *Gay Science*:**] Nietzsche is perhaps best known for having proclaimed the death of God. He does in fact mention that God is dead, but his fullest and most forceful statement to this effect actually belongs to one of his fictional characters, the madman of *Gay Science* 125.... The 'death of God' is a metaphor for a cultural event that he believes has already taken place but which, like the death of a distant star, is not yet visible to normal sight: belief in God has become unbelievable, the Christian idea of God is no longer a living force in Western culture.

Nietzsche views all gods as human creations, reflections of what human beings value [**this should sound familiar from *The Birth of Tragedy***]. However, pagan gods were constructed from the qualities human beings saw and valued in themselves, whereas the Christian God was given qualities that were the opposite of what humans perceived in themselves, the opposite of our inescapable animal instincts. Our natural being could then be reinterpreted as 'guilt before God' and taken to indicate our unworthiness. Constructed to devalue our natural being, the Christian God is a projection of value from the viewpoint of the ascetic ideal [**remember that Schopenhauer loved this ideal**]. That this God is dead amounts to a prediction that Christian theism is nearing its end as a major cultural force and that its demise will be brought about by forces that are already and irreversibly at work.

One such force is the development of atheism in the West, a development that stems from Christian morality itself and the will to truth it promotes. The will to truth, a commitment to truth 'at any price', is the latest expression of the ascetic ideal, but it also undermines the whole Christian worldview (heaven, hell, free will, immortality) of which 'God' is the symbol.

According to Nietzsche, the loss of belief in God will initiate a 'monstrous logic of terror' as we experience the collapse of all that was 'built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality' [*Gay Science* 343]. In notes made late in his career, Nietzsche calls this collapse of values 'nihilism', the 'radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability'. He predicts '*the advent of nihilism*' as 'the history of the next two centuries', and calls himself 'the first perfect nihilist of Europe'. However, he adds that he has 'lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind'. Nihilism is therefore not his own doctrine, but one he diagnoses in others (including his own earlier self). He *does not* believe that nothing is of value (or that 'everything is permitted') if God does not exist, but that this form of judgment is the necessary outcome of the ascetic ideal. Having come to believe that the things of the highest value – knowledge, truth, virtue, philosophy, art – must have a

source in a reality that transcends the natural world, we necessarily experience these things as devoid of value once the ascetic ideal itself leads to the death of God, to the denial that any transcendent reality exists.

[For the *Beyond Good and Evil*:] Nietzsche's criticism of morality is perhaps the most important and difficult aspect of his later philosophy. Calling himself an 'immoralist' - one who opposes all morality - he repeatedly insists that morality 'negates life'. He turned against it, he claims, inspired by an 'instinct that aligned itself with life'. Whatever Nietzsche might mean by suggesting that morality is 'against life,' his point is *not* that morality is 'unnatural' because it restricts the satisfaction of natural impulses. He finds what is natural and 'inestimable' in any morality in the hatred it teaches of simply following one's impulses, of any 'all-too-great freedom': it teaches 'obedience over a long period of time and in a single direction'.

His objection to morality sometimes seems to be not that it is 'against life', but that it promotes and celebrates a kind of person in which he finds nothing to esteem: a 'herd animal' who has little idea of greatness and seeks above all else security, absence of fear, absence of suffering. However, he sometimes uses 'morality' to refer to what he approves of, for instance, 'noble morality' and 'higher moralities'.

[For the *Genealogy of Morals*:] Priests did not invent the idea of 'evil' on the spot. The notion of blame required for the revaluation emerged in a quite different sphere, that of right conduct or duty, the development of which Nietzsche sketches in the second essay of *Genealogy*. The pre-moral ancestor to which this essay traces moral versions of right and wrong, duty or obligation, is the ethics of custom, an early system of community practices that gained the status of rules through the threat of punishment. These rules were perceived as imperatives, but not as moral imperatives: violation was punished, but not considered to be a matter of conscience or thought to incur guilt.

Questions:

- How does his distinctive "slave morality" arise? How is it distinguished from "master morality"? (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 260)
- What is the difference between "good and bad", on the one hand, and "good and evil", on the other? (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 260)
- What are the origins of guilt and bad conscience, how does the priest appropriate these notions? (All the readings from *The Genealogy of Morals*)
- Consider first why forgetting is a useful activity and how it is overcome in order to make promising possible (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Section 1ff).
- How is responsibility made possible, what is the "mnemotechnic" of prehistory?
- Why does punishment arise out of anger (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Sections 4ff), rather than revenge (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Section 11)?
- What is the relationship between bad conscience and society (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Sections 16ff)?
- Why is bad conscience an illness? How is bad conscience related to God (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Sections 19ff)?
- How does morality make use of the bad conscience (*The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Section 21)?