

Phil 104, Monday, November 8, 2010
Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, III

What are the ascetic ideals?

- Self-denial, or even self-punishment.
- A rejection of sensuality, fame, political power for poverty, humility, chastity.
- A retreat from, or denial of, life, drives, change—existence as it really is...
- ... in favor of an imaginary ideal, a pure, perfect, unchanging existence (e.g., heaven, the afterlife, nirvana).

“What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?”

For the *artist*: No use asking, since the artist is just a mouthpiece for some philosopher (!).

For the *philosopher*:

- The meaning of ascetic ideals is not “a laudable will to contentment and simplicity.”
- Rather a will for the conditions best suited to his own will to power. “Every animal—therefore *la bête philosophe* [=the philosophical animal] too—instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power; every animal abhors... every kind of intrusion or hindrance that obstructs or could obstruct this path to the optimum.”
- The philosopher’s will to power seeks to release the “chief energy” of “contemplation.” For that, it most needs freedom from disturbance and interference.
- But the philosopher is only using the “preestablished type” of “contemplative man,” which was established by the ascetic priest...

For the *ascetic priest*:

- In part, the ascetic ideal is simply a means to survival. “His right to exist stands or falls with the ideal.”
 - Contemplative men were at first despised for their “inactive, brooding, unwarlike” character.
 - They needed to make themselves feared, and they achieve this through “cruelty toward themselves, inventive self-castigation,” etc.
- But also, more importantly, the ascetic ideal is a means to the priest’s will to power, by:
 - conquering himself
 - acquiring power over others, including both the weak...
 - ...*and* the strong, by inverting the values of good and bad...
“when would they achieve the ultimate, subtlest, sublimest triumph of revenge? Undoubtedly if they succeeded in *poisoning the consciences* of the fortunate with their own misery, with all misery, so that one day the fortunate began to be ashamed of their good fortune and perhaps said to one another: ‘it is disgraceful to be fortunate: *there is too much misery!*’”
 - reshaping values to suit his own inactive, static, contemplative temperament
“The ascetic treats life as a wrong road... where he can he compels *his* evaluation of existence.”
 - striving to triumph *over life itself*.

“For an ascetic life is a self-contradiction: here rules a *ressentiment* without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions; here an attempt is made to employ force to block up wells of force.”

For *the weak, the sickly, the powerless*:

The weak...

- self-destructively resent the powerful,
- are bursting at the seams with pent-up drives to dominate (the will to power),
- suffer from this and from their self-contempt,
- and are gripped by suicidal nihilism: an inclination to stop willing anything at all, to see no value at all in the world.

The ascetic priest uses the ascetic ideal on the weak as a way of...

- controlling and disarming their self-destructive resentment and drive to dominate,
- and treating (the symptoms, but not the causes of) their suffering and nihilism.

Here the ascetic ideal finally takes on the characteristics of the morality of good and evil:

1. The valuation of freedom from suffering above all else.

“*absence of suffering*—sufferers and those profoundly depressed will count this as the supreme good, as the value of values; they are *bound* to accord it a positive value, to experience it as *the* positive as such.”

2. “Love of the neighbor” as a perverse but harmless outlet for the will to power.

“by prescribing ‘love of the neighbor,’ the ascetic priest prescribes fundamentally an excitement of the strongest, most life-affirming drive, even if in the most cautious doses—namely, of the *will to power*. The happiness of ‘slight superiority,’ involved in all doing good, being useful, helping, and rewarding, is the most effective means of consolation for the physiologically inhibited, and widely employed by them when they are well advised: otherwise they hurt one another, obedient, of course, to the same basic instinct.”

3. Identifying with the group, seeking its good rather than one’s own, as a way of fleeing one’s dissatisfaction with oneself.

“the awakening of the communal feeling of power through which the individual’s discontent with himself is drowned in his pleasure in the prosperity of the community.”

4. Guilt as a less harmful redirection of resentment...

“I suffer: someone must be to blame for it”—thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: “Quite so, my sheep! Someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—*you alone are to blame for yourself!*” —This is brazen and false enough: but one thing at least is achieved by it, the direction of *ressentiment* is *altered*.”

...and as a way to give meaning to suffering, a way to give people who can will nothing else something, anything, to will.

This is where the real power of the ascetic ideal, and the associated morality of good and evil, lies: it gives meaning to the suffering that, in Nietzsche’s view, is inescapably part of life, and it

allows us to will *something*—if only, perversely, the denial of life!—in the face of a world where nothing seems worth willing. This may be why the ascetic ideal, and its associated morality of good and evil, was finally able to take hold of the powerful.

Nietzsche's criticism of morality

- (1) The morality of good and evil is reflectively unstable. It is sustained by psychological forces—hatred, vengeance, aggression—that it condemns.
- (2) The morality of good and evil is unhealthy for those who internalize it. Their aggressive instincts are pent up and redirected at themselves.
- (3) The morality of good and evil stifles individual greatness. Because...
 - it devalues greatness, creativity, and valorizes meekness, conventionality;
 - it burdens the great with the care of the weak;
 - opposes suffering and risk in favor of contentment and tranquility;
 - prevents inequality and the transformative self-criticism that such inequality produces.
- (4) The morality of good and evil, and the associated ascetic ideal, prevents us from fully affirming life or existence, or allows us only the most perverse form of affirmation: affirming only by denying, avoiding *not* willing only by willing *nothing*.

Review Questions:

Which of the above criticisms of morality—(1), (2), (3), or (4)—do the following passages illustrate? Explain.

- A. the higher *ought* not degrade itself to the status of an instrument of the lower, the pathos of distance *ought* to keep their tasks eternally separate! Their right to exist, the privilege of the full-toned bell over the false and the cracked, is a thousand times greater: they alone are our *warranty* for the future, they alone are *liable* for the future of man. The sick can never have the ability or obligation to do what *they* can do, what *they* ought to do: but if they are to be able to do what *they* alone ought to do, how can they at the same time be physicians, consolers, and “saviors” of the sick.
- B. by prescribing “love of the neighbor,” the ascetic priest prescribes fundamentally an excitement of the strongest, most life-affirming drive, even if in the most cautious doses—namely, of the *will to power*. The happiness of ‘slight superiority,’ involved in all doing good, being useful, helping, and rewarding, is the most effective means of consolation for the physiologically inhibited, and widely employed by them when they are well advised: otherwise they hurt one another, obedient, of course, to the same basic instinct.
- C. The man who, from lack of external enemies and resistances and forcibly confined to the oppressive narrowness and punctiliousness of custom, impatiently lacerated, persecuted, gnawed at, assaulted, and maltreated himself; this animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage as one tried to ‘tame’ it; this deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild, who had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness—this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the ‘bad conscience’