

Phil 2, February 22, 2010

Nietzsche criticizes the morality of modern, European, bourgeois culture, which...

- is deeply influenced by Christianity
- values, in individuals, humility, modesty, charity, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice
- values, in politics, fairness, equality, and democracy
- opposes aggression, self-aggrandizement, and distinctions in social status
- recommends curtailing one's interests and not putting oneself above others

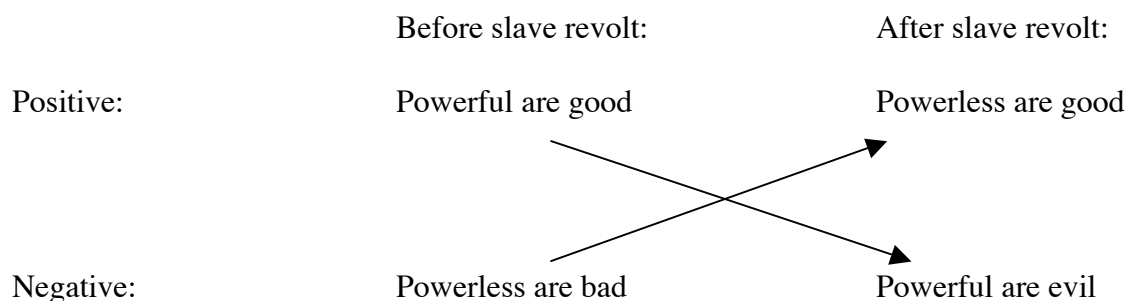
Nietzsche argues that this morality is the result of a "slave revolt," in which the dominated substituted their own values for those of their dominators.

- The values of the powerful, organized around the distinction between good and *bad*,
- were replaced by the values of the powerless, organized around the distinction between good and *evil*.

Originally the distinction between good and bad was *simply a distinction in social standing* (§4). The word for "good" in most languages derives from words for "aristocratic," or "noble, whereas the word for "bad" derives from words for "common," "plebeian," or "low." The distinction between good and bad came to signify not only differences in political power, but also character traits associated with those differences in political power. The good are the warlike or the godlike, for example, and the bad are the cowardly.

The "slave revolt" inverts this distinction between good and bad. Where the traits of the powerful were once associated with the positive value, good, and the traits of the powerless were once associated with the negative value, bad, the traits of the powerful come to be associated with the negative value, evil, and the traits of the powerless come to be associated with the positive value, good.

Which traits of the powerless become good? Precisely those traits that our Christianized morality now prizes so highly: humility, modesty, fairness, equality, charity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, etc.



When did this slave revolt occur? Presumably Nietzsche does not believe that it is a datable event. It is instead a gradual transformation, involving the rise of Christianity, which accounts for the gulf between the values of the Greeks and Romans, and our own.

The more important question for Nietzsche is *why* the slave revolt occurred. His formulations suggest two different explanations.

On the “conspiracy theory,” the slave revolt was a plot deliberately hatched by the powerless to control the powerful. But why then does morality continue to have such a deep and pervasive hold on us? What psychological forces sustain our adherence to the distinction between good and evil?

On the “psychological theory,” the slave revolt was the result of *unconscious* psychological forces in the minds of the powerless.

- The powerless have the same instinct (the “will to power”) to dominate others, to subject the world to their will, as have the powerful.
- Since it cannot be given outward, physical expression, this will to power takes an inward, psychological form. The powerless harbor hatred and *ressentiment* of the powerful.
- These negative *emotions toward* the powerful give rise, in one way or another, to negative *evaluations of* them.
- Having come to evaluate the powerful negatively, the powerless then evaluate themselves, by contrast, positively. If they are the opposite of those who are evil, they assume, then they must be good.

Notice that the powerless first evaluate the powerful negatively and only later, in reaction, evaluate themselves positively. The powerful do the reverse. They first evaluate themselves positively and only later evaluate the powerless negatively, as lacking the traits that they (the powerful) have. Moreover, they view the powerless with pity, rather than enmity. It would be debasing to give the powerless that kind of recognition, to care about them that much.

In the second essay (which you weren’t asked to read for today) Nietzsche considers another consequence of the repression of the will to power. This occurs when the state is formed, by conquest. Since the will to power, at least that of the powerless, cannot find any outward, physical expression, it again takes an inward, psychological form. Instead of subjugating another, man subjugates himself. This is “bad conscience” or guilt.

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, or prevents us from fully affirming our lives. (If this is Nietzsche’s criticism, then he must accept some values. His criticism would be that morality undermines those values.)