Nietzsche’s Morality of Ressentiment
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In Essay I of The Genealogy of Morals, ‘Good and Evil, ‘Good and Bad’, Nietzsche investigates the provenance of contemporary morality by examination of the conditions and circumstances from which moral values emerged. His investigation leads him to conclude that our existing morality is not coeval with man, but was brought about by a “slave revolt” in morality through the feeling of ressentiment. The following pages closely analyze the emergence and growth of ressentiment as a reactive feeling to a sustained and repeated condition of powerlessness of the “priestly class” against the more powerful social class, the “noble class”. It was this feeling of powerlessness, a frustrated feeling of being decisively overcome by someone more powerful, which resulted in the creation of a new, imaginary “place” where these frustrated emotions could be discharged. In this imaginary place the “slaves” were well off and become the superior class, while the morality of the “nobles” became inferior. According to Nietzsche, the establishment of this imaginary place and its moral valuations understandably appealed to the underprivileged, powerless “slaves”. With more and more adherents, the establishment gained momentous effect until it became the only excepted source of morality. Nietzsche maintains that the triumph of “slave” morality, morality of ressentiment, was so complete that its values reign to date.

To fully understand the psychic mechanism of ressentiment, one must first evaluate the three different social classes: the nobles, the priests, and the slaves. Nietzsche approaches the analysis of the three classes as generative of different types of moralities which, in turn, generate distinctively different moral values.
The first social class, the noble class, consists of people of “a strong physique, blooming, even exuberant health, together with all the conditions that guarantee its preservation: combat, adventure, the chase, the dance, war games.”¹ These naturally well-endowed people are “the noble, mighty, highly placed, and high-minded who decreed themselves and their actions to be good.”² The nobles consider themselves good because they always exceed others in a dense series of social relationships. Whether it is through intellectual superiority or in terms of brute strength, the nobles always emerge on the top of the social hierarchy. The triumphs come to them naturally. Any obstacle, any challenge, or any opposition is overcome effortlessly. In a sense, the nobles see their enemies and opposition as a welcome challenge that measures their own strength and nobility, and helps them to “affirm themselves even more gratefully and delightedly.”³ The untroubled existence of constant triumphs leads to the nobles’ assertion of their own “incomparable self-worth and unrivalled social station.”⁴ And it is this exultant feeling of superiority that allows the nobles to designate themselves and everything they do as “good”, and everyone and everything else as “bad”.

The “bad” people make up Nietzsche’s second social class, the slaves. For Nietzsche, slaves are all those people who are “worse off than the others, inferior or suppressed in some

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:VII. 167
² Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:II. 160
³ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:X. 171
⁴ Daniel Conway, Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals. 30
way… They wish to better their situation, but they cannot, because those better off are powerful enough to prevent it.”\textsuperscript{5} The slaves, being decisively overcome, have no choice but to obey the nobles. They are at the nobles’ command, and thus “experience themselves, for the most part, as subject to the arbitrary alien will of another.”\textsuperscript{6} Their powerlessness earns them the contempt of the nobles who, separated by “pathos of distance,”\textsuperscript{7} cannot even grasp the passive existence of the slaves.\textsuperscript{8}

However, not everybody whom the nobles consider “bad” deals with their subordinate position passively. These people constitute Nietzsche’s third social class, the priestly class. Nietzsche identifies the priests as someone displaying “the unmistakably noble evaluations that are indicative of the pathos of distance.”\textsuperscript{9} But in spite of the fact that the priests posses the noble traits, they despise the nobles. The reason for their hatred is that they are no longer able to keep up with truly superior class. The priests are simply always “one step behind” the nobles. Since priests are not “willing to accept a subordinate position in the social hierarchy… conflict between the priestly and knightly aristocratic modes of evaluation is inevitable.”\textsuperscript{10} Nevertheless, the priests are aware that if the conflict between the two classes was to escalate into an open, violent war, the nobles would overwhelmingly triumph. Thus, “when faced with the prospect of

\textsuperscript{5} Rudiger Bittner points out in her article \textit{Ressentiment}, “Nietzsche’s talk of slaves should be understood in a broad, metaphorical sense, not restricted to what is called “slavery” in economic history.” \textsuperscript{97}
\textsuperscript{6} David Owen, \textit{Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality}, 78
\textsuperscript{7} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Genealogy of Morals} I:II. 160
\textsuperscript{8} Nietzsche states that the nobles’ contempt for the slaves was reflected in the terms the nobles used to refer to the common man. Terms such as \textit{poneros} or \textit{mochtheros} “characterized the common man as a drudge and beast of burden”; other terms described them as “bad, base, unhappy”. Nietzsche grants that sometimes the nobles might have misjudged the slaves “but this happens only with regard to spheres which they do not know well, or from the knowledge of which they austerely guard themselves: the aristocrat will, on occasion, misjudge a sphere which he holds in contempt, the sphere of the common man, the people.” \textit{The Genealogy of Morals} I:X. 171, 172
\textsuperscript{9} Daniel Conway, \textit{Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals}. 33
\textsuperscript{10} Daniel Conway, \textit{Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals}. 34, 35
war with the knightly nobles, the impotent priests responded, as was their habit, by turning inward.”

Unlike the nobles, which habitually display their thoughts and ideas, and instinctually act out their drives and desires, the priests are never allowed to freely express their emotion or discharge their energies and aggressions. The nobles possess “the perfect functioning of the ruling, unconscious instincts or even a certain temerity to follow sudden impulses,” which allows them to absorb any negative thoughts and feelings in their instantaneous actions. The noble man “cannot for long take seriously their enemies, their misfortunes, their misdeeds; for such characters have in them an excess of plastic curative power, and also a power of oblivion… such a man simply shakes off vermin which would get beneath another’s skin.” The vermin does in fact get under someone’s skin, the skin of the priests. The feeling of being almost entirely dominated becomes gradually more frustrating and forces the priests to start to strategize against the nobles. Nietzsche calls the priestly man untruthful and dishonest. “His soul squints, his mind loves hide-outs, secret paths, and back doors; everything that is hidden seems to him his own world, his security, his comfort; he is expert in silence, in long memory, in waiting….” Thus, out of the awareness of their powerlessness, the priest “has forged the perfect weapon – an acid tongue and a strategic awareness of the world.”

The priests’ thwarted energies and actions grow into a feeling of ressentiment. Nietzsche defines ressentiment as a psychic mechanism, more specifically, as a reactive feeling to certain experiences. It is not only a self-absorbed feeling of pity, or a mere awareness of one’s

11 Daniel Conway, Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals. 36
12 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I.X. 172, 173
13 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I.X. 173
14 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I.X. 172
15 Robert C. Solomon, One Hundred Years of Ressentiment. 104
misfortune. As Nietzsche tells us, “it takes two for ressentiment.” The two parties involved are the frustrated, scheming priests and the carefree, almost reckless nobles. The feeling of ressentiment is aimed at the nobles, whom the priests blame for their oppressed, secondary position in a society. This is the crucial characteristic of the feeling of ressentiment: it is always projected outward at a particular target. And while the target of ressentiment flourishes, the subject of ressentiment withers away.

Nonetheless, the reactive forces of the priests never become strong enough to enable them to physically overcome the nobles. The nobles always represent an obstacle in all of the priestly activities. Hence, the frustrated priests create a fundamentally and entirely new place into which they channel their energies, their imagination. In their new fantasy world, the priests “invent a story according to which they really are well off.” They will negate the qualities that esteem individual power such as strength or speed, and start to affirm new, opposite values. However, the opposite values such as weakness and slowness are not very admirable, as “contempt for weakness is not an unusual sentiment, even among the weak.” Therefore, the priests must transmute these values into more laudable virtues: slowness into prudence; impotence, which cannot retaliate, into kindness; “the inoffensiveness of the weak, his cowardice, his ineluctable standing and waiting at doors, are being given honorific titles such as patience; to be unable to avenge oneself is called to be unwilling to avenge oneself – even forgiveness.” Only this transformation of the conditions that are responsible for the experience of impotence and powerlessness makes these values attractive and desirable.

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16 Rudiger Bittner, *Ressentiment*. 129
17 It is the lack of power on the side of the priests that is the cause as well as the content of ressentiment, and despite of the fact that the priests exhibit their disdain, or indifference for power, they are highly concern with it.
18 Rudiger Bittner, *Ressentiment*. 130
19 Robert C. Solomon, *One Hundred Years of Ressentiment*. 107
20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* I:XIV. 180, 181
However, the most important aspect of their newly created fantasy is the concept of ‘free will’. The priests claim that the nobles are free to choose their actions and are therefore accountable for the suffering and violence they cause. “It is within the discretion of the strong to be weak.”\(^\text{21}\) Not only does this new claim turn the spontaneous, instinctual actions of the nobles into evil deeds, but it also allows the weak to interpret their defining weakness as a willed and commendable act. The weak even go as far as to claim that they “prefer their suffering which they propose as an unassailable index of their goodness. The slaves could retaliate if they so desired… but they choose instead the righteous path of suffering and self-deprivation.”\(^\text{22}\) The concept of ‘free will’ thus allows the slaves to transform the suffering they endure at the hands of their oppressors into their crowning virtues.

Nietzsche vehemently disputes the claim of operative ‘free will’ with his famous parable of the birds of prey and the tasty lambs, in which the birds of prey represent the nobles and the lambs portray the priests and the slaves. Understandably, the lambs do not like the birds of prey. They consider the birds of prey “evil”. And since they view themselves and their actions as the opposites of the birds of prey, they therefore conclude that they must be “good”. Although Nietzsche himself states that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such reasoning, he becomes alarmed when this reasoning is disseminated as the fundamental principle of a new morality. “To expect that strength will not manifest itself as strength, as the desire to overcome… is every bit absurd as to expect that weakness will manifest itself as strength.”\(^\text{23}\)

\(^\text{21}\) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* I:XIII. 179
\(^\text{22}\) Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals*. 46

In his article *One Hundred Years of Ressentiment*, Robert C. Solomon identifies the allegory of the birds of prey and lambs as biologically deterministic. In his opinion, Nietzsche’s allegory does not allow for a choice of existential options. “Whether one is strong and noble or weak and pathetic is… a kind of “given”, in terms of one’s social origins and upbringing and at the core of one’s character, perhaps even in one’s genes.” Solomon finds Nietzsche’s deterministic thesis rather troubling, not because he wants to believe in “transmutation of avian and mammalian species, or in the easy possibility of thoroughly changing one’s character by a mere act of will. Rather, it is because
Nietzsche is positive that the birds of prey are not free not to be predatory, and he supports his claim by stating that “a quantum of strength is equivalent to a quantum of urge, will, activity….”24 There is no neutral agent behind an action, “the doing is everything.”25

Nevertheless, the new priestly morality gains more and more adherents. The priests make the new values of humility, altruism, and sensitivity even more attractive by promising happiness and ultimate bliss in the “next” world, the true and lasting world beyond. The suffering and self-deprivation of this world are told to be the signs of their “election by God.…Perhaps also a preparation, a test, a kind of training… something for which eventually they will be compensated with tremendous interest.”26 This new fantasy world comforts the slaves. It allows them to live in hope of better future. Future they call “Judgment Day, the coming of their kingdom, the ‘Kingdom of God.’”27

Nietzsche quickly points out that this faith and hope in a better future is nothing more than a wish of revenge. Upon arrival in their “kingdom”, the slaves expect to be handsomely rewarded for their life of humility and deprivation. The anticipated reward is the “delight in the eternal suffering of their erstwhile oppressors.”28 It is this vision of indemnification that helps the slaves to endure their life in “preferred” submissiveness, deprivation, and suffering.29

Rudiger Bittner in her essay Ressentiment raises a question whether it was possible that the priests and the slaves would sincerely believe in their new fantasy world. Bittner reasons that

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24 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:XIII. 178
25 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:XIII. 179
26 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:XIV. 181
27 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals I:XIV. 182
28 Daniel Conway, Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals. 48
29 Daniel Conway points out in his book that the wish of the slaves to be rewarded in the “after-world” is not share by the priests. The priests, who created the slaves’ vision of the rewarding afterlife, “expect to be paid in the all-too-human currency of secular power”. 48
they must have known, at least initially, that their new fictional situation is merely a product of their imagination. “After all, they make it up themselves.”

She goes on to compare this situation to the famous Aesop-type story by the French fabulist La Fontaine. In his story *The Fox and The Grapes*, a hungry fox sees rosy, visibly ripe grapes. But he cannot reach them. So he tells himself that the grapes are sour. Bittner sees an analogy between La Fontaine’s fox and Nietzsche’s priests and slaves. The fox’s desire for the grapes is frustrated, and so he tells himself a story that makes him feel better. The forces of the priests and the slaves are suppressed, and so they too tell themselves a story to make themselves feel better. Both parties, however, know that it is a mere story. “So they know as well that telling the story will not help. Everybody knows that to be happy and to figure in a story in which one is happy are two things.” Bittner thus contemplates that the only way the new imaginary story can truly relieve the frustrations is to sincerely believe in its veracity. The fox must believe that the grapes are indeed sour; the slaves must truly believe that they are better off than the nobles. Bittner concludes that it took certain madness to accept the imaginary story. “People who are suffering and eager, but unable, to change their condition are liable to develop (as one develops a symptom) the metaphysical and moral convictions which in spite of being false still dominate our lives. Simply: people go mad from suffering.” According to Bittner, the wholehearted belief in the invented story does not form immediately; it might take generations before the society, driven by suffering and deprivation, completely denies and nullifies the conditions which were once responsible for the experience of powerlessness.

Nietzsche’s investigation of the genealogy of morality discloses the historical existence and activity of the noble morality, to which the slave morality arose as a reaction. Combining

30 Rudiger Bittner, *Ressentiment*. 130
32 Rudiger Bittner, *Ressentiment*. 130
historical facts with psychological insight, he insists that contemporary regnant values descended from the *ressentiment*-fueled slave morality, while the values that are now shunned once represented the dominant noble morality. His contempt for the feeling of *ressentiment*, or rather, the underlying weakness that causes and fuels *ressentiment*, works to the advantage of the noble morality as the source of superior moral values. Indeed, Nietzsche himself concludes his essay by saying that although the current victory of the slave morality is undeniable, he has high hopes for a future graced by the resurgence of noble values.
Works Cited


