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Huddleston, Andrew (2015) What is enshrined in morality? Understanding the grounds for Nietzsche's Critique. *Inquiry* 58 (3), pp. 281-307. ISSN 0020-174X.

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**What is Enshrined in Morality?:**  
**Understanding the Grounds for Nietzsche's Critique**

“Let us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values,  
*the value of these values themselves must first be called into question...*  
-Nietzsche, GM: “Preface,” 6

**I. Introduction**

It is a truism—albeit one requiring two sets of scare quotes—that Nietzsche, the self-styled “immoralist,” (Cf., EH, “Destiny,” 4) is a critic of “morality.” But what does this amount to? I begin by being more specific about the form of “morality” that he takes as his target. As is now often held in the secondary literature on Nietzsche, he is not, in his opposition to morality, against the very idea of norms and values as such. Rather, he is critical of a broad sociological phenomenon—a family of normative views that arise, and become dominant, over the past couple millennia in the West. I then turn to the main question of the paper: What does Nietzsche have against this morality? What, in particular, are his grounds for objecting to it?

A prominent interpretation has it that Nietzsche takes morality to task for its bad effects on the realization of the sort of perfectionistic values he cares most about. Specifically, its pernicious influence is thought to hamper the flourishing of great individuals.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly one of Nietzsche's recurring complaints about morality. But there are good reasons, I argue, to resist this reading as the best, and certainly as the exclusive, account of the grounds for Nietzsche's criticism of morality. I then go on to propose an alternative construal. This interpretation sees Nietzsche's objection to morality as rooted not simply or even primarily in its bad effects, but in what, for lack of a better word, might be described as the intrinsically objectionable *expressive character* of the

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<sup>1</sup> A notable representative of this view is Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (Routledge, 2002), 127 ff.

institution of morality, and of moral values themselves. (This notion of “expressive character” is one I will be clarifying in due course.) It is not just that morality has effects that are objectionable. It is that it enshrines ideals that are themselves objectionable. Just to get the structure of the objection, and abstracting from Nietzsche, compare the following two sorts of broadly ethical criticism: The sociological phenomenon of racial segregation has bad effects; but it also enshrines ideals that are themselves intrinsically objectionable, regardless of their effects.

In taking the lynchpin of Nietzsche’s criticism to be something *other* than morality’s effects, the reading I propose better represents Nietzsche’s complex attitude toward the wide range of effects—both negative *and positive*—that he sees morality as engendering. It also makes better sense of Nietzsche’s apparent doubts that the truly great could ever be stymied by morality. Moreover, and most importantly, it allows for the idea that morality, as a normative institution, is deeply objectionable, in such a way that its objectionable character outstrips its objectionable effects.

Yet I should be clear at the outset that I do not seek to vindicate Nietzsche’s criticism of morality as straightforwardly correct. Some of his barbed arrows find their target. But much of what he says in his criticism of morality is, at the very least, highly tendentious, and we would do well to treat it with considerable caution, if not outright skepticism. This is not, however, to suggest that his remarks on this topic—insofar as they fail to level decisive charges against the institution of morality or to have wide-ranging implications for what we today ought to do—are to be confined to the realm of purely exegetical interest. There are important philosophical lessons to be learned here from Nietzsche’s work, if not always about the actual failings of morality itself then about the

kinds of ethical and ideological objections that philosophers and cultural critics can sensibly raise. One of the central styles of critique that we see in Nietzsche's work, exemplified especially in his criticism of morality, involves interpreting social and cultural phenomena, as one might interpret texts or works of art, with an eye toward extracting the meaning or significance they have in light of the ideals that they enshrine, and then attacking them, on broadly ethical grounds, on account of this. It thereby creates the space for criticizing institutions not just for what pernicious effects they have, but for the intrinsically objectionable character of what they express.

In the wake of Nietzsche, and to some degree under his influence, this form of criticism became prominent in the 20th century, particularly in the work of the Frankfurt School. In a far less critical vein, it has certain historical antecedents in the approach of Hegel, in seeing various self-understandings and self-misunderstandings of *Geist* manifested in a range of phenomena throughout human history. One sees echoes of it in ordinary ethical discourse. While I do not wish to make any ambitious historical hypotheses about whether, in its stingingly reprobative form, this type of ethical criticism originates with Nietzsche, he is certainly of its most distinctive, adroit, and interesting practitioners. And, as a *style* of ethical and social criticism, it is worthy of our philosophical attention, whatever our attitude toward the success of Nietzsche's application of it in his critique of the institution of morality itself.

## II. The Historical Institution of Morality

Nietzsche uses the term “morality” in a way that is less than precise, as was his wont.<sup>2</sup> At a few points in his work, he uses it quite broadly to mean any system of non-prudential normative guidance about how one should conduct one’s life and one’s relations with others.<sup>3</sup> But more often, he uses the term “morality” more narrowly as the name for a particular family of views that rise in social prominence during the long span of time between the birth of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> It is the latter sense that is at issue when Nietzsche conceives of morality as something that comes into being at a particular time in history and stands in need of a critique.

But what is this thing morality? Given its protean character, it resists a neat definition. Although in its archetypal form this morality is intimately bound up with the tenets of the Christian religion, it branches and persists in various secularized inheritors.

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche’s most frequent term is “*Moral*.” He also uses “*Moralität*,” and occasionally (e.g., D, 103) “*Sittlichkeit*.” The last can be confusing because Nietzsche distinguishes morality (in one sense of the term) from the pre-moral system of customs, which he calls the “morality of custom” [*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*] (GM, II:2; D, 9).

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, for example, writes: “Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality—in other words, as we understand it, merely one type of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other types, above all higher moralities, are, or ought to be, possible” (BGE, 202). Here he would appear to be using “morality” in two senses at once, in a narrower sense when he refers to it as the morality that holds sway in Europe, in a broader sense when he refers to it as just one type of human morality among others. The narrower sense is far more frequent in Nietzsche’s work, and that is how I will use the term “morality” here. (Yet, as we shall see, to say even of this narrower sense that it is “one” type of morality can also be a misleadingly imprecise locution, because it suggests a unity that this morality lacks.) When Nietzsche uses the term in the narrower sense, his use is in some ways similar to that of Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Harvard, 1985)—no doubt himself inspired by Nietzsche—who takes morality to be a historically-contingent “system” and a “peculiar institution.” Rather than seeing morality and ethics as one and the same, Williams sees morality as one branch of ethics. Nietzsche does not systematically draw this distinction himself in his terminology, though something like it is implicitly there, in the distinction between morality in the narrower sense and morality in the broader sense that we find in BGE, 202. This ethics/morality divide in Nietzsche’s work is the guiding theme of Simon May, *Nietzsche’s Ethics and His War on ‘Morality’* (Oxford, 1999). See also Maudemarie Clark, “On the Rejection of Morality: Nietzsche’s Debt to Bernard Williams,” in *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism*, ed. Richard Schacht, (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> There are the stirrings of this new morality system in the ethical views of Socrates and Plato. But at least according to Nietzsche’s central historical argument in the First Essay of the *Genealogy*, the birth of the morality system is coterminous with the rise of Christianity. Christianity of course doesn’t develop in a vacuum; it draws on this Platonic heritage, and appeals to the masses as a kind of “Platonism for ‘the people.’” (BGE, “Preface”).

Kantian ethics and Benthamite utilitarianism, as far apart as they are, are both, in Nietzsche's eyes, parts of this same morality family. It might then be more apt to describe "morality," even in the narrower sense that picks out an historical entity, as a collection of loosely-related worldviews (or "moralities" in the plural) rather than what we might think of as a rigorous and consistent first-order normative system.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it is important to see that these moralities, as Nietzsche understands them, are not just a series of rules to be obeyed, but are a constellation of related ideals, values, and so on—in short, a whole outlook on life—as Christianity or secular liberal humanism are. (Of Christianity, for example, Nietzsche writes that it is "the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected" (BT, "Attempt," 5)). At the most general level, these moralities that comprise morality (in the historical sense) will typically include some or all of the following:

- (1) **norms**, which prescribe things and proscribe others;
- (2) a **meta-norm**, according to which its norms are universal in scope and overriding in importance;

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<sup>5</sup> For a characterization of what commitments Nietzsche takes this value "system," hodgepodge that it is, to involve, see Maudemarie Clark, "Nietzsche's Immoralism and the Concept of Morality," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley, 1994). Leiter (2002), Chs. 3 and 4, and Raymond Geuss, "Nietzsche and Morality," in his *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge, 1999). Both Leiter (p. 77) and Geuss (p. 167) rightly stress Nietzsche's anti-essentialism about morality, and Clark (p. 31) similarly stresses the fact that it is a synthesis of disparate historical strands. . It should not be viewed as a failing on Nietzsche's part that he does not define the morality he is attacking precisely. He does not think it is the sort of phenomenon that can or should be defined precisely. On this latter point, see GM, II:13, where Nietzsche writes, "...all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable."

(3) **valuations and assessments** (e.g., that the suffering of sentient creatures is bad, that all human beings are of equal worth and dignity, that people deserve to be punished for the wrongs they “freely” do; that the only thing unqualifiedly good is “the good will”);

(4) **ideals** informed by these valuations about what sort of lives are most worth leading (e.g., to live a life that is as free as possible of suffering, to live a life of saintly abnegation, or to live a life of devoted altruism);<sup>6</sup>

(5) **associated descriptive beliefs** (e.g., that human beings have free will in a metaphysically strong sense; that the human soul is immortal).

But, as the varied parenthetical examples I have just given will suggest, when we get to the substantive commitments among various branches of this unruly thing “morality,” it can be difficult to find much agreement. Consider the deontological moral norms suggested by Kant as opposed to the utilitarian ones offered by Bentham, or think of the tremendous importance of pity in Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy in contrast to its relative lack of importance in Kant’s. Morality, if taken to be a unitary thing, would seem to be rife with internecine disagreement. But the singularity of the term “morality” is especially misleading here. I’ll continue to use the term “morality” in the singular, as Nietzsche most often does, but we must bear in mind that this term, even in its narrower sense, is meant to capture the moral thinking of philosophers as different as Kant, John Stuart Mill, and St. Augustine.

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<sup>6</sup> There may not be a hard-and-fast line between “norms” and “ideals.” One way of drawing the line would be to see “ideals” as hortatory, but not as mandatory. But then again, there are probably some norms by which certain things are “strongly discouraged” rather than outright impermissible or by which some actions are “above and beyond the call of duty” (i.e., supererogatory) rather than mandatory.

It can seem very odd that Nietzsche lumps these together under one term, since it is difficult to see what unites them.<sup>7</sup> He does, as I have suggested, take them to share a common ancestry. But even if true, this ambitious sociological claim does little to help us pick out the contours of this concept “morality.” The best way to cast a net over Nietzsche’s rather diffuse target “morality” is to notice the paradigmatic philosophical moralizers at whom Nietzsche levels criticism. The main targets are:

- 1) Kant (BGE, 187; A, 11-12);
- 2) Christians, e.g., St. Paul or Thomas Aquinas (A, 42; GM, I:15);
- 3) Utilitarians, e.g. Bentham and Mill (BGE, 44; TI, “Maxims,” 12);
- 4) Schopenhauer (BGE, 186; GM, “Preface,” 5; A, 7);
- 5) Socrates and Plato (BGE, “Preface”; BGE, 190; TI, “Socrates”);<sup>8</sup>
- 6) “Enlightened” “secular” progressives, e.g. George Eliot (TI, “Skirmishes,” 5).

As our loose working understanding of “morality,” in Nietzsche’s sense, we might then say that it is a family of worldviews, offering themselves as guides to what is valuable and to how human life must be conducted, which are in the spirit of the moral thought of one or more of these figures. As should be clear from what I have said so far, there is no unified thing

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<sup>7</sup> One idea, proposed in Alexander Prescott-Couch, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and Historical Individuals,” *International Studies in Philosophy* (forthcoming) is that morality is not a functional kind, but rather an historical individual. While I strongly agree that morality is an historical kind of some sort, I prefer to think of morality as analogous to the family as opposed to the individual for the reasons I outline above.

<sup>8</sup> As I’ve already mentioned, there is a tension here with Nietzsche’s own account of when morality began. The best way to resolve this tension, in keeping with his terminology, is to see Socrates and Plato as proto-moralists, who retrospectively become part of the moral tradition because of what their views lead to with Christianity and its secular offspring (BGE, “Preface”). Nietzsche is loose enough with his terminology that it is not worthwhile for us to spend too long trying to figure out whether Socrates and Plato “really” belong to the moral or proto-moral tradition.



“morality” that is the conjunction of these views. Excepting some moral philosophers whose intuitions have been brought into line with their own theories, the “commonsensical” morality that a given person endorses in late 19th century Europe (or today, for that matter) is likely not going to be a doctrinaire version of any one of these. It is instead likely going to be a hodgepodge of disparate, perhaps internally inconsistent strands, drawn from these different moral traditions we have inherited. Now I would like to turn to the question of why Nietzsche attacks this morality.

### III. The Effects Interpretation

I shall begin by considering an interpretation that we might call the *Effects Interpretation*. The Effects Interpretation construes Nietzsche’s attack as focused on the effects of morality on the realization of the perfectionistic values Nietzsche cares about. On one key interpretation in this vein, offered by Brian Leiter, Nietzsche is taken as holding that morality is problematic because of a “causal mechanism of harm.”<sup>9</sup> This reading attributes to Nietzsche an empirical claim about the effects of morality on human excellence and creative achievement. Living in accordance with morality, or more indirectly, living in a culture suffused with the attitudes characteristic of morality, “will have the effect of leading potentially excellent persons to value what is in fact not conducive to their flourishing and to devalue what is, in fact, essential to it.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet does Nietzsche think morality is bad simply, or even primarily, because of its bad effects? *No*, I will be arguing here. In this section, I want to develop the most plausible

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<sup>9</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 127 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 133.

version of the Effects Interpretation and then to raise some challenges for it. These are not, by any means, meant to be decisive objections to it. I do, however, want to emphasize that morality's effects are considerably more of a mixed bag than the Effects Interpretation can make it seem. It is far from clear whether things would have been better, from the standpoint of the perfectionistic values associated with human excellence and cultural achievement, had this morality never arisen. It is as much a gift as a curse. Then in the section (IV) to follow, I will develop what I think is a more decisive objection to this Effects Interpretation, at least insofar as it claims to be the *exhaustive account* of why Nietzsche is critical of morality. As I will argue in this section to come, a great deal of Nietzsche's criticism of morality has nothing whatsoever to do with the effects of morality; it is instead focused on the objectionable expressive character of the ideals, practices, and symbols of morality itself.

In order to assess the Effects Interpretation in more detail, though, let us now consider how morality's effects might be thought to pose a threat to the flourishing of human excellence. The Effects Interpretation is most plausible when it moves from a sole focus on explicit transgressions of morality as a necessary means to other beneficial ends (e.g., Gauguin abandoning his family in order to paint in Tahiti, in the famous example from Bernard Williams<sup>11</sup>) to a focus instead on more insidious threats. As Brian Leiter has argued, the greatest risk from morality is not in the explicit prohibitions it sets up and the strictures created by having to live in accordance with these prohibitions. It is instead a matter of the attitudes that morality more subtly encourages, which run the risk of infecting great

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<sup>11</sup> *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981).

individuals.<sup>12</sup> Just to give one example: In a society in which pity is among the most lauded moral attitudes, a potentially great artist might come to wallow in self-pity instead of exercising a sort of stoical “hammer-hardness” against himself and producing a masterpiece (BGE, 225). On Leiter’s own version of the view, those threatened by morality are a subclass marked off by certain fixed psycho-physical “type” characteristics.<sup>13</sup> The idea would be that morality corrupts this particular type of person. One could, it bears noting, also have a version of the Effects Interpretation without this typological commitment, holding that although Nietzschean “higher types” are not antecedently given in this way, a culture in which moral norms are dominant is one that will not be conducive to the *formation* of great individuals.<sup>14</sup>

In any event, this family of interpretations, which I am including under the banner of the Effects Interpretation, all would locate the problem with morality in its detrimental effects. Morality demands, or else more subtly encourages, that an individual live in a certain way, or that social institutions be arranged in a certain “moral” and “just” way, yet in doing so morality imperils the flourishing of human greatness and threatens the possibility of cultural achievement. Now whether this “moral infection,” or “moral miasma” as it might be called, could *ever* undo a Nietzschean great individual, as at least Leiter’s version of the Effects Interpretation would seem to assume, is a vexed matter that I shall treat later; given Nietzsche’s other commitments, there is reason to doubt whether Nietzsche, on such a typological view, should think that it in principle ever can. But we’ll try to work out that tension in due course. Let us accept for the time being the view, which Nietzsche often

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<sup>12</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 8

<sup>14</sup> I’m grateful to \_\_\_\_\_ for suggesting this possibility.

seems to endorse, that the morality system *can* thwart the flourishing of great individuals in ways more and less direct. Even if we accept this view, we will need to tread carefully. For the Effects Interpretation, especially in the subtle form of it that is most plausible, cuts the other way as well. If we allow that the flourishing of great individuals can be imperiled in a world in which morality holds sway, then we should also allow, as Nietzsche himself does, that the flourishing of great individuals will *benefit* from a surrounding culture in which moral norms prevail.

As Nietzsche himself acknowledges, the priests' invention of morality has had good effects along with bad ones:

...with the priests *everything* becomes more dangerous, not only cures and remedies, but also arrogance, revenge, acuteness, profligacy, love, lust to rule, virtue, disease—but it is only fair to add that it was on the soil of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became *an interesting animal*, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil*—and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts (GM, I:6).

In terms of these consequences, it is a danger to greatness, but it is also a boon.<sup>15</sup> The story that we get from Nietzsche, throughout GM II and III as well, is very much one of how much we *owe* to morality. Through the internalization of man, we get the bad conscience

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, the world is in key respects going downhill without Christianity. In a notebook entry entitled, "Man owes the Christian Church," Nietzsche writes: "it made the European spirit fine and supple through its 'intolerance.' One sees right away, as is the case with freedom of the press in our democratic age, that thought becomes squat and dumpy." (KSA, 11:450 [1885]).

and guilt, to be sure. But we also get the preconditions for an advanced form of autonomy.<sup>16</sup> Through the ascetic ideal, we get a devaluation of the earthly and a perverse overvaluation of truth. But this also forges in us a kind of particularly relentless *truth-seeking*, through which we come to ask uncomfortable questions about the history and value of the values we have inherited (GM, III:24). Both this advanced form of autonomy and this truth-seeking (BGE, 227) arguably are preconditions for and components of human excellence.

Or take Leiter's own suggestion about the insidious effects of morality on artistic creativity. Offering a philosophical reconstruction of Nietzsche's position, he argues that if great individuals come to think that suffering is a bad thing that needs to be alleviated, this will indirectly encourage them to become averse to suffering themselves. On Leiter's reading, it is not so much that the great artist explicitly endorses this condemnation of all suffering whatsoever. After all, if the artist were thinking about things with such precision, he would likely distinguish prudentially worthwhile from wholly worthless suffering—and condemn only the latter. The problem is rather that the artist unconsciously absorbs this *general aversion* to suffering from his cultural milieu.<sup>17</sup> And since being willing to suffer is a precondition of many great creative achievements, the influence of morality will have a stultifying effect on creative accomplishment.

Suppose that this is right. Nonetheless, this negative effect of morality is arguably counterbalanced by a positive one, produced by a countervailing cultural strand, which is indebted just as much to morality. And that is the tremendous glorification of suffering in at least one central branch of the morality family. Think of the passion of Christ; or the tale of

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<sup>16</sup> See Frederick Neuhouser, "Autonomy and Spiritual Illness" (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 133.

Job, tested by God; or of the countless stories of saints—flayed, grilled, pelted with stones, pierced with arrows, and otherwise tortured for their beliefs. Christianity is a veritable cult of suffering; indeed the only people more Romantic than the Romantics in their celebration of suffering are Christians. Surely *the calling* is very different for the Christian saint and the Nietzschean great individual. And granted, according to Christian doctrine, there is “redemption” for their suffering in heaven. Perhaps it is even right that the Christian would prefer a world in which there is no suffering at all.<sup>18</sup> But we are talking about the *subtle and indirect* effects of certain ideals. If morality, on the one hand, threatens artistic accomplishment by suggesting, via its Schopenhauerian and utilitarian strands, that a life free from suffering is the best life, likely it has had just as suggestive a power in the other direction via its Christian strand: suggesting that the life of tortured self-sacrifice in the service of a noble cause is the highest human calling (at least during one’s earthly life in this vale of tears).<sup>19</sup>

To see this mixture of positive and negative effects at work at the individual level, let us now turn to an actual historical case—Beethoven—one of Nietzsche’s prime examples of someone great (BGE, 256). Had Beethoven spent his life ministering to the needs of the

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<sup>18</sup> For this reading, see Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Harvard, 2006), p. 160-1.

<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, one needn’t even be subtly swayed toward morality for it to be beneficial for greatness. Even as something to fight *against*, “the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia” has proved important. For it has “created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit the like of which had never yet existed on earth: with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals” (BGE, “Preface”).<sup>18</sup> Just consider the greatness of Nietzsche himself (and he, as his self-aggrandizing autobiography attests, is one of his favorite examples of someone great.) Would Nietzsche, the fulminator without equal, be half as interesting to read if he did not have Christianity or morality to spit upon? As he himself acknowledges, one needs a “profound appreciation of the value of having enemies...The church always wanted the destruction of its enemies; we, we immoralists and Antichristians, find our advantage in this, that the church exists” (TI, “Morality,” 3). Even if on some level morality is to the disadvantage of people like Nietzsche, it is also to their advantage. A central theme in Nietzsche’s work is how greatness can grow out of and thrive on agonal struggle, and he is arguably engaged in that sort of agonal struggle with the Judeo-Christian moral tradition in fighting so vigorously against its claim to primacy. For a discussion of the role of the *agon* in Nietzsche’s work, see Christa Davis Acampora, *Contesting Nietzsche* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

poor, or consumed with self-pity for his deafness, he would not have been able to produce the great works that he did. That is likely true. But had Beethoven not drawn subtly on a moral backdrop (in Nietzsche's sense of "moral") in producing his works, he would not have been able to produce the greatest works that he did. *That* seems true as well.

Beethoven's personal religious beliefs are a matter of some dispute; they seem to have been mistily spiritual and far from doctrinaire.<sup>20</sup> But Beethoven's own beliefs aside, could he have produced the *Missa Solemnis*, an undeniably religious work at least in subject matter, outside of a Christian cultural context? Or how about the middle movement of his sublime Op. 132, where Beethoven uses to wonderful effect the Lydian mode, so reminiscent of medieval church music? The transcendent quality of this quartet, surely some of the most profound chamber music ever written, depends on the whole backdrop of religious associations that it draws upon.<sup>21</sup> While Beethoven's own religious beliefs may be more difficult to pin down, his Enlightenment moral beliefs are inescapably clear. In the choral finale of his Symphony No. 9, Beethoven sets a text of deeply egalitarian moral sentiments to extraordinarily soul-stirring music. However grossly hypocritical he could sometimes be in his personal behavior, it is not as if Beethoven saw himself living by a wholly amoral credo. Far from it, in fact. In a letter of 1811, he goes so far as to say: "From my earliest childhood my zeal to serve our poor suffering humanity in any way whatsoever by means of my art has made no compromise with any lower motive."<sup>22</sup> And indeed, how about

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<sup>20</sup> See Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (Schirmer, 1977), p. 263-4.

<sup>21</sup> As the character Spandrell in Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point* says of this movement, "It proves all kinds of things—God, the soul, goodness—unescapably. It's the only real proof that exists; the only one, because Beethoven was the only man who could get his knowledge over into expression." (Chapter XXXVII) While it surely doesn't "prove" anything of the sort, nor did Beethoven have "knowledge" of those things, that is an apt description of its spiritual aura.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Solomon (1977), p. 36

Beethoven's persona of the tortured, suffering artist, living only for his art?<sup>23</sup> Is this mode of life wholly unconnected with an undercurrent of Christian moral ideals about self-sacrifice and martyrdom in the service of a cause (even if *the cause itself* is different)? Would such an arch-Romantic ideal have arisen without Christianity? At the level of direct and indirect influences, morality—and this, remember, includes Christianity—was as much a benefit to Beethoven's greatness as a creative genius as it was a threat.

So too, we might say, when it comes to many of the peaks of culture, by Nietzsche's lights. How exactly was morality bad for the musical artistry of Bach, Händel, and Heinrich Schütz, "Germans of the strong race" (EH, "Clever," 7), composers Nietzsche very much admires, yet composers whose greatest works are suffused to the core with the Christian worldview and its ideals, and whose works, Nietzsche thinks, are indebted to it in more subtle ways as well?<sup>24</sup> And what is one to say of the Italian Renaissance? It certainly looms preeminent in Nietzsche's estimation (A, 61). But is the greatness of the Renaissance even thinkable without the Christian worldview that centrally informed it?

We should not confuse this last question with another, related question of whether the Renaissance, or any other great creative flowering, in a person or a culture at large, would have been possible were there not also strong counter-forces to these Christian and more broadly moral ideals at the same time. For it is surely true that there were such

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<sup>23</sup> In Beethoven's moving letter (usually referred to as the "Heiligenstadt Testament") dated 6 October 1802 and addressed to his brothers, he describes how he overcomes his suicidal despondency over his deafness: "But what mortification if someone stood beside me and heard a flute from afar and I heard nothing; or someone heard a shepherd singing, and I heard nothing. Such happenings brought me close to despair; I was not far from ending my own life—only art, only art held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to me that I should leave the world before I had produced all that I felt I might, and so I spared this wretched life..." in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (eds.), *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (Schirmer, 1984), p. 326-7.

<sup>24</sup> In KSA, II:451 [1885], Nietzsche points out how in the hidebound form of counterpoint writing, Bach finds his freedom as an artist.



countervailing, noble, life-affirming forces and that Nietzsche thinks they were essential (A, 61). We can even go so far as to deny, as Nietzsche does in *Twilight of the Idols*, that the greatest figures of the Renaissance were even at core Christians. Nietzsche writes: “a Christian who would at the same time be an artist simply does not occur. One should not be childish and object by naming Raphael or some homeopathic Christian of the nineteenth century. Raphael said Yes, Raphael *did* Yes; consequently, Raphael was no Christian.” (Though perhaps Michelangelo would have been a much better example to illustrate Nietzsche’s point, since his flair for homoerotic depictions of rippled musculature is rather more deeply at odds with Christian morality. But we shall stick with Raphael.) Even supposing Nietzsche is right in his rather ambitiously revisionary claim that Raphael is not at core a Christian, does it follow that Christianity *in the cultural background* was not a beneficial precondition for Raphael’s being the great artist he was? Can we imagine the oeuvre of Raphael, stripped of the religious subject matter he draws upon in the *Disposition*, or the famous *Madonna and Child*, or the *Transfiguration*? Without these sorts of works, Raphael’s corpus would be seriously depleted. Indeed, the sense in which it would still even be *Raphael’s* corpus anymore under these circumstances is quite attenuated. Raphael came at a particular time in art history, in a particular cultural setting, faced with particular demands and particular artistic materials. His greatness consisted, in large part, in what he able to accomplish with—and despite—these.

This last point is a recurring theme in Nietzsche’s work—*what one makes of what one is faced with*. This is particularly important, according to Nietzsche, when one is faced with something that has the potential to be a serious danger. Consider what Nietzsche says about Wagner in *Ecce Homo*. After describing Wagner as at once both a “toxin” and an “antitoxin,”

Nietzsche goes on to say: "...given the way I am, strong enough to turn even what is most questionable and dangerous to my advantage and thus to become stronger, I call Wagner the great benefactor of my life" (EH, "Clever," 6). For those who are strong enough, that which is "questionable and dangerous" can also be what is most beneficial. So too with morality; this *pharmakon*, dare one say, may be a poison, but it is also a potion for creativity.<sup>25</sup>

What, then, are we to make of Nietzsche's idea that the strong run the risk of being "sickened" by the moral values of the herd (GM, III:14)? We might think this "sickness" of morality is bad for them, pure and simple, as cow's milk is bad for human newborns.<sup>26</sup> But this would be a drastic oversimplification of Nietzsche's complex understanding of sickness. After all, when it comes to literal sickness, Nietzsche is far from thinking it need be a wholly bad thing for the person who is sick. Sickness can destroy people, to be sure. But it can also be a spur to greatness, so long as one is strong enough to turn the sickness to one's advantage, as he stresses he was able to do in his own case: "In the midst of torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by a laborious vomiting of phlegm, I possessed a dialectician's clarity *par excellence* and thought through with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain-climber, not subtle, not *cold* enough" (EH, "Wise," 1). When it comes to more metaphorical forms of sickness, like the "infection" of a person by a system of values, we should, as I have been urging, not see this infection as needing to be wholly a bad thing either. For it may be partly out of his

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<sup>25</sup> There is a more general point in the background: "How much one is able to endure: distress, want, bad weather, sickness, toil, solitude. Fundamentally one can cope with everything else, born as one is to a subterranean life of struggle; one emerges again and again into the light, one experiences again and again one's golden hour of victory – and then one stands forth as one was born, unbreakable, tensed, ready for new, even harder, remoter things, like a bow that distress only serves to make tauter" (GM, I:12).

<sup>26</sup> Leiter (2002), p. 106, applying to Nietzsche an example of Peter Railton's from "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986).

sickness, both literal and metaphorical, that a person's greatness flows, as was the case with many of the artists and intellectuals Nietzsche admires—himself included. (This is a point that Thomas Mann, in a gesture replete with Nietzschean undertones, makes quite dramatically in *Doctor Faustus*, where he has the central character, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, contract syphilis to deepen his creativity.) In short, we don't do enough justice to morality when we say simply that it is a causal threat to the flourishing of greatness. Like a sickness, as Nietzsche understands it, it has both possible harms *and benefits*.

It might be conceded that perhaps in controlled enough doses, or when counterbalanced by stronger life-affirming forces, morality can be beneficial. But if a potentially great person becomes *too* taken with morality, then he will be stifled, his "conscience" will get "poison[ed]" (GM, III:14). Nietzsche, this argument will go, through his critique of morality wants to prevent this danger from taking hold. He is not, the revised claim will thus run, opposed to all contact with or influence from morality more generally on the part of the nascently great.

Nietzsche does say we should "protect the well-constituted from the worst kind of air, the air of the sickroom" (GM, III:14). But this exhortation, we should notice, is in tension with other views he holds. Take Nietzsche's conviction, the leitmotif of *Ecce Homo*, that a truly great person will be able to turn questionable and dangerous things to his advantage. "A typically morbid being cannot become healthy...For a typically healthy person, conversely, being sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* to life, for living more" (EH, "Wise," 2). This is because the "well-turned out person," as he says, has "a taste only for what is good for him; his pleasure, his delight cease where the measure of what is good for him is transgressed. He guesses what remedies avail against what is harmful; he exploits bad

accidents to his advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger” (EH, “Wise,” 2).<sup>27</sup> Goethe, Beethoven, and Raphael (if Nietzsche is right about him) didn’t need Nietzsche enlightening them with the exhortation to be life-affirming or with warnings not to underestimate the importance of suffering to great achievement; they did so by themselves, “exploit[ing] bad accidents to [their] advantage,” because *that is what great people do*. Perhaps Nietzsche just sees himself as making explicit what was already implicit for these towering figures. Yet it remains puzzling why he is so worried about protecting the great individual from the “sickroom air” of morality, when he himself appears to deny that this bad air would ever pose a decisive threat to the flourishing of the genuinely great individual at all. Such people’s constitutions and attitudes toward life prevent moral infections from being debilitating, since if they are truly great, they will be able (or will have been able) to turn “the questionable and dangerous” to their advantage.<sup>28</sup>

We are left with an apparent dilemma: Either morality’s effect on a person can be powerful enough to “stifle” or “crush” that person, thereby undermining his potential for greatness, or it cannot be powerful enough. If morality is powerful enough, then the person in question will not be able to be a Nietzschean great individual anyway, since he is unable to turn the “questionable and dangerous” to his advantage, as Nietzsche thinks is criterial of being a great person. If, on the other hand, morality is not powerful enough to stifle the person, then morality turned out not to be a debilitating threat after all. He flourished despite it; what didn’t “kill” him made him stronger (EH, “Wise,” 2). Either way, morality

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<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche’s point here becomes more plausible if he means “kill” [*umbringt*] in a looser sense, extending beyond literal death.

<sup>28</sup> What Nietzsche says about falling victim to pessimism presumably holds true of other moral “sicknesses” as well: “One falls victim to it as one falls victim to cholera: one has to be morbid enough in one’s whole predisposition. Pessimism itself does not create a single decadent more” (TI, “Skirmishes,” 36).

would not seem to be a decisive threat in terms of its causal consequences on the flourishing of greatness.

Now this is of course in tension with Nietzsche's repeated suggestions that morality *has had* and *will have* bad effects (e.g., "an irreplaceable amount of strength and spirit" is "crushed, stifled and ruined," (BGE, 188), Cf., GM, I:12; A, 5). Perhaps the resolution is that morality has stifled many who, while strong, capable and intelligent far beyond the mass of mankind, were not up to the challenge of facing it and turning it to their advantage. Nietzsche, I suspect, is thinking of Pascal in this regard, when he calls him "the most instructive victim of Christianity" (EH, "Clever," 3; Cf., A, 5). But it would seem that the best Nietzschean conclusion is not the one he himself draws in GM, III:14, of the following form: Morality threatens to undo the great by stifling them; so let us protect them from morality so that they have an easier time of things. It is instead: *If morality is successful at stifling a person, then ipso facto he is not great.* Before there was Nietzsche, and his critique of morality, there were, by his own lights, great individuals, who managed quite well without him, because they made do ably with what they were faced with, whether it be Christianity or some other branch of the morality family. If they did not need his help when morality was an even stronger cultural force, why should they need it even more as morality weakens its social grip in the late 19th century? At the very least, this is an interpretive puzzle, representative of a serious tension in Nietzsche's work.

None of this is to deny that Nietzsche thinks that living in accord with morality (or more subtly, inhaling its vapors from the cultural surroundings) can have—and has had—many bad effects on human creativity and greatness. Nietzsche makes this abundantly clear in so many places in his work (e.g., TI, "Skirmishes," 38; A, 7, 11 and many others). But, by

the same token, morality, as we have just seen can have and has had many *good* effects on human creativity and greatness too, effects that Nietzsche himself recognizes and celebrates. Both blame and praise can be laid at morality's door in this respect. Of course, just because morality has some good effects, we cannot reject the possibility that Nietzsche's main objection to morality is *still* grounded in its bad effects, since the bad effects might outweigh the good ones. But even when it comes to the effects of morality on the elite cadre of Nietzschean higher types or potential higher types—and the key claim of the Effects Interpretation is that *this* is where morality will be seriously deleterious—Nietzsche himself appears deeply conflicted: Sometimes he claims that morality poses a serious danger for the flourishing of greatness, other times he claims that morality *cannot* be a danger for the flourishing of greatness, since part of being or becoming great is to turn what could otherwise be dangerous to one's advantage. Most importantly, though, the Effects Interpretation suggests an odd sort of commitment on Nietzsche's part. It can make it seem as though, as far as the Nietzschean values of perfectionism are concerned, things would have been better off had morality not arisen. But that, as I have suggested, is far from clear. Nietzsche describes again and again how as the result of morality we have become corrupted, sick, and decadent. But then again, it is thanks to morality that we have raised ourselves above the rest of the animals, acquired depth and become interesting (GM, I:6). Would he have us give that up and return to the state of the marauding nobles described in the First Essay of the *Genealogy*? This reversion to the past is not possible (TI, "Skirmishes," 43), nor is it desirable (GS, 377).

As I say, these objections are not meant to be decisive. And it is nearly indisputable that Nietzsche thinks morality has bad effects. But given these interpretative challenges, it

would be helpful to find some alternative Nietzschean foothold for his critique of morality, one that does pin his charges against morality solely or even primarily on morality's bad effects. And as I shall suggest in the section to follow, there is just such a foothold: We can interpret Nietzsche's critique as less about what the institution of morality *causes* and more about what it *expresses*. He has room to object to the character of moral values independently of the mixed bag of effects they engender. This allows Nietzsche to acknowledge that morality's effects on the realization of perfectionistic values have basically been mixed, but still to hold that morality is *thoroughly objectionable* even despite this. In the section to follow, I will sketch the space for this alternative and offer textual evidence that supports the idea that these are among the considerations that Nietzsche appeals to.

#### IV. The Notion of Expressive Character and the Expressive Character of Morality

Nietzsche, in addition to charting morality's effects, both positive and negative, is, I will suggest, giving a "reading" of morality, as one might give an interpretation of a work of art.<sup>29</sup> Just as one might read a work of art with an eye toward extracting the worldview enshrined or expressed in it, Nietzsche is looking to give a reading of various aspects of morality as an historical human institution by interpreting its features so as to draw out what he takes them to represent. And just as one might object to the ideals, values, and attitudes that one's interpretation takes to be in an art work—the misogyny or the anti-Semitism, for example—Nietzsche is objecting to the ideals, values, and attitudes that, on his interpretation, are to be found in morality and its attendant phenomena. He is objecting

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<sup>29</sup> These analogies between Nietzschean philosophy and literature are a central feature of Nehamas's account (1985). He sees interpretation as a pervasive element in Nietzsche's philosophical practice.

not just to the effects of morality, but to the expressive character of the institution of morality itself.

Although this style of criticism finds particular purchase in criticizing works of art, it would be very misleading thereby to cast it as an *aesthetic* objection. After all, *the grounds* on which one is objecting are not distinctively aesthetic grounds having to do with distinctively aesthetic failings, e.g., that the work is ugly, or disordered, or something of that sort. Rather, the grounds for the objection have to do with more broadly ethical failings. When, for example, Adorno objects to the authoritarianism that he (of course, very controversially) alleges is in the music of Stravinsky, it is not a purely aesthetic objection; he is finding this music objectionable on ethical and political grounds. But importantly, his charge is not grounded in a causal sociological claim that this music *leads to* authoritarianism. Nor is his claim the intentionalist one that Stravinsky deliberately crafted his music to give voice to this ideology. It is rather that, in its immanent musical materials, it is expressive of authoritarianism and is problematic on this account.

To get a grip on the structure of the objection, compare the case of pornography and the criticism one might level against it.<sup>30</sup> One could take it to task for its troubling effects. As some have argued, pornography incites men to rape women. But suppose that its effects, on balance, turned out to be quite mixed, maybe even beneficial; perhaps empirical investigation shows that it actually *deters* crimes against women by giving men with certain violent sexual fantasies an alternative outlet. Still, one could object to pornography for the values one takes it to enshrine. Such criticism would be in principle independent of what effects one takes pornography to have. And of course, if pornography turns out to have bad

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<sup>30</sup> My thanks to \_\_\_\_\_ for suggesting this point of analogy.



effects on balance too, as it may well (especially if one moves beyond a focus on rape and considers the other deleterious downstream effects of the objectifying attitudes toward women that it fosters), one then has an *additional ground* for objecting to it. This ground is about what problematic attitudes and ideals one takes pornography itself to be expressive of. It would be strange, and it would grotesquely understate the ethical import of such a charge, to think it is an aesthetic objection to pornography. It is rightly an ethical charge, but just not one rooted in a causal sociological claim about its effects.

Or to move away from anything remotely art-like having to do with the mimetic at all, consider the example I mentioned in the introduction: the charges one might level against segregationist ideologies and practices, of the sort associated with the Jim Crow laws. These without a doubt have tremendously bad effects on the overall flourishing of those stigmatized by them, by hampering their equal access to educational and other social goods and by undermining their self-respect and self-worth by making them out to be second-class citizens. But they are also objectionable because they (i.e., the laws and the social institutions and practices in which they are imbedded) express a certain offensive idea about racial superiority and inferiority. In addition to objecting to their bad effects, we can object to this too.

I offer these prefatory remarks as a first pass for characterizing a certain kind of critical strategy. For it is this style of broadly ethical criticism that we see in much of Nietzsche's criticism of morality. I have chosen these morally-aware examples deliberately as a way of setting things up. Nietzsche himself often betrays a shocking degree of misogyny, and he thinks the equal worth and dignity of all was a sham fostered by Christianity and later perpetuated by the morality system. Even if we do not share in these views of his (and

unlike in the examples I just gave, there will be a greater divergence between the views of critic and audience, in the case of Nietzsche's criticism of morality), the *style* of criticism he is leveling can be appropriated for ethical and political ends that we find more congenial. Yet rather than trying any further to describe in this abstract way what he is doing, let us look to some textual evidence and build our account from there.

Take, for example, his interpretation of the Christian concept of God. He frames the issue by suggesting the contrast between the pagan gods and the Christian God in terms of what they represent. He writes: "when everything strong, brave, masterful, and proud is eliminated from conceptions of God [*Gottesbegriffe*], when he degenerates step by step into a mere symbol, a staff for the weary, a sheet-anchor for the drowning, when he becomes the god of the poor, the sinners, and the sick par excellence...*what* does such a transformation bespeak?" [*wovon redet eine solche Verwandlung*] (A, 17). Here the issue is not so much what effects this view of God causes, but what values this conception of God, in the abstract, *enshrines*. And against such values, Nietzsche delivers a stinging verdict in the passage that follows: "The Christian conception of God—God as the god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth.<sup>31</sup> It may even represent the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types. God degenerated into the *contradiction* of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!" (A, 18). The flaccid and impoverished values represented in this conception of the divine are not Nietzschean ones of strength, bravery, mastery, pride—as, he supposes, might

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<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche continues, describing the intellectualist God that comes to prominence in early modern philosophy: "Even the palest of the pale were able to master [this God]: our honorable metaphysicians, those concept-albinos. They spun their webs around him until, hypnotized by their motions, he himself became a spider, another metaphysician. Now he, in turn, spun the world out of himself—sub specie Spinozae. Now he transfigured himself into something ever thinner and paler; he became an 'ideal,' he became 'pure spirit,' the 'Absolute,' the 'thing-in-itself.' The deterioration of a god: God became the 'thing-in-itself.'" (A, 17)

be exemplified in a life-affirming pagan deity. As we shall see, Nietzsche's construals of various moral ideals and institutions are typically leveled in this tendentious register. I don't seek to vindicate his interpretation and criticism as correct, or to adduce considerations for and against, but instead to make clear the critical manner in which he often proceeds. (In the section to follow (V), I say more about what I think the philosophical import of this style of criticism is, and how I think it might have a claim on the attention of Nietzsche's audience.)

He levels structurally similar charges against the conceptions of well-being that he regards as debased. Describing the reaction of his ideal person of "warrior" virtue, he writes: "The human being who has *become free*—and how much more the *spirit* who has *become free*—wipes his feet [*mit Füßen treten*]<sup>32</sup> with the contemptible type of well-being dreamed of by shopkeepers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen, and other democrats" (TI, "Skirmishes, 38). He of course mentions various people drawn to such a view of well-being, but notice that in the first instance it is this *idea* of well-being that is itself the explicit object of contempt. The ideal enshrines as supreme what is in Nietzsche's view a sort of well-being befitting cows—hence the mention of them in the list—a longing for the "green-pasture happiness of the herd" (BGE, 44) where human well-being is reckoned by the calculus of pleasure and pain. Guiding one's life by this vulgar ideal has the potential to lead to harmful (BGE, 225) and to beneficial effects (BGE, 61). But there is room to object *to it* independently of these effects, and that is a line of attack that Nietzsche here exploits.

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<sup>32</sup> This is Nietzsche's play on words: This phrase literally means to "tread on with [one's] feet." This could therefore mean something like "trample underfoot," but more metaphorically it means to "regard with contempt." I here adopt Judith Norman's nice translation that captures a bit of both senses.

Or take the example of ascetic ideals, the subject of the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*. Here Nietzsche makes his hermeneutically-minded approach very clear.<sup>33</sup> The issue for him is not simply about what effects ascetic ideals have had. For he begins the Third Essay with a question asking not what ascetic ideals have caused, but asking instead, “[w]hat do ascetic ideals mean?” [*Was bedeuten asketische Ideale?*] (GM, III: 1). He is not, to be sure, asking what they “mean” in the sense of asking what their definition is; it is a much broader notion of “meaning”—that is, what they stand for, signal, reflect. He notes that they are a complex palimpsest. But out of this, Nietzsche distills what he takes ascetic ideals at core to enshrine: “[a] hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, [a] horror of the senses, of reason itself, [a] fear of happiness and beauty, [a] longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself” (GM, III:28). As Nietzsche goes on to spell out in the course of the Third Essay, ascetic ideals have had a range of effects both good and bad. They have poisoned humanity, infecting them with a hatred of life and of this-worldly things (GM, III:14). But they have also staved off death and nihilism by giving humans a goal to strive for, even if they are striving for something hollow (GM, III:13, 28). And ascetic ideals ultimately lead to the “self-overcoming” of morality (GM, III:27), partly in the person of Nietzsche himself, since they are the kernel of his relentless honesty in facing the truth that many have been too timid to face. But apart from these mixed effects, ascetic ideals exude a worldview that Nietzsche regards as perverse and repugnant.

Nietzsche describes Christianity as animated by a similar sort of attitude, setting itself against worldly things with gusto. In his “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” appended as an

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<sup>33</sup> As stressed by Nehamas (1985), esp. Chs. 4 and 7 and Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, (Blackwell, 1991), p. 84.

Introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1886 (the year in which he published *Beyond Good and Evil* and was writing *On The Genealogy of Morals*), he writes:

From the very outset Christianity was essentially and pervasively the feeling of disgust and weariness which life felt for life, a feeling which merely disguised, hid and decked itself out in its belief in “another” or “better” life. Hatred of the “world,” a curse on the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a Beyond, invented in order better to defame the Here-and-Now, fundamentally a desire for nothingness, for the end, for rest, for the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” (BT, “Attempt,” 5).

No doubt he is probably thinking of this attitude as manifested by particular Christians. But notice the way he couches things: it is a feature of *Christianity writ large*.

Often, though, the line between criticism of the worldview itself and criticism of its proponents blurs, and it is very difficult to tell whether Nietzsche is objecting to the values and institutions in the abstract or to the deficient character of the people who accept such views, or to both. Frequently it would appear to be both. Consider what Nietzsche says about the Christian ideal of immortality in *The Antichrist*:

That everyone as an “immortal soul” has equal rank with everyone else, that in the totality of living beings the “salvation” of *every* single individual may claim eternal significance, that little gnats [*Mucker*] and three-quarter-madmen may have the conceit that the laws of nature are constantly broken for their sakes—such an intensification of every kind of selfishness into the infinite, into the *impertinent*,

cannot be branded with too much contempt. And yet Christianity owes its triumph to this miserable flattery of personal vanity: it was precisely all the failures, all the rebellious-minded, all the less favored, the whole scum and refuse of humanity who were thus won over to it. The “salvation of the soul”—in plain language: “the world revolves around *me*” (A, 43).

The ideal is itself objectionable. It is so because it, for example, enshrines “the equal rank” of everyone, an idea that Nietzsche views as not simply false but as debasing; making rank so easy to come by devalues it into something no longer worth anything, like the status of “vice-president” in those companies where there are thousands holding this title. And moreover *the people* who accept this ideal are objectionable for their narcissistic vanity (the irony of which Nietzsche revels in, given the Christian celebration of humility and condemnation of pride) and objectionable especially for the fact that this overweening self-regard far exceeds what their actual characteristics warrant.<sup>34</sup> “[A]ll the failures, all the rebellious-minded, all the less favored, the whole scum and refuse of humanity” help themselves to a form of *undeserved* self-regard. Notice how Nietzsche draws attention to the hermeneutic dimension of what he is doing by suggesting that he is rendering in “plain language” what was concealed in the conventional Christian understanding of things. Nietzsche trades what he regards as an inaccurate or incomplete interpretation—“the salvation of the soul”—with another one—“the world revolves around me.” Now Nietzsche is of course noting an important effect here. People are “thus won over” to these Christian

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted obvious that Nietzsche has nothing against proud self-regard where that is warranted. The noble soul, as he says, “has reverence for itself” (BGE, 287)—, and fittingly so.

ideals, he says. But his charge just as much appears to be against the ideal itself and against the people drawn to it, as it is to this effect or to further downstream effects.

Consider, similarly, the passage from the *Summa Theologiae* that Nietzsche takes great relish in citing in the *Genealogy* (I:15).<sup>35</sup> Here Aquinas claims that the bliss of the saints in heaven is made all the better by being able to watch the torments of the damned down in hell. Whatever self-interpretation Christians may have of their hell as representing the triumph of “justice,” Nietzsche puts a different spin on it—and on them. As he reads the notion of “hell,” it is representative of a kind of vicious glee, of a sort that they are not honest with themselves about.<sup>36</sup> Rather than Dante’s inscription over hell—“I too was created by eternal love”—Nietzsche says that “I too was created by eternal *hate*” would better capture the spirit of this heaven with an observation deck (GM, I:15).

The strategy of argument is even more vivid in the previous section of the *Genealogy* where Nietzsche imagines a character, Mr. Rash and Curious, descending into the “dark workshop” where ideals are manufactured. A sort of transformation is going on, this character reports back to Nietzsche, an attempt to make “whiteness, milk, and innocence of every blackness” (GM, I:14). The creators of morality are trying to carry off this transformation, so as to conceal what their ideals really are. Nietzsche here draws an analogy to art; he tells Mr. Rash and Curious to be attentive to “the most ingenious, most mendacious artistic stroke” of these “cellar rodents full of vengefulness and hatred” (GM, I: 14) who seek to apply a concealing layer of prettifying paint to their ideals. Again, the aim

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<sup>35</sup> III, Supplementum, Q.94, Art. 1

<sup>36</sup> This pleasure in cruelty is not just true of Christianity, he thinks, but is a pervasive feature of many human institutions, such as public punishment, where torture is made into a communal festival, and guilt, where one gets to turn the knife against oneself (GM, II).

here is to scrape off the layer of paint and to make manifest what is actually extolled by these ideals—here weakness and cowardice, marketing themselves under more appealing names.

Once could go through many more passages just like these. Kantianism, along with Platonism, enshrines a longing for a beyond—the “true world” behind this world (Cf., TI, “True World”). Democracy enshrines a hostility to rank, it “represents the disbelief in great human beings and an elite society” (WP, 752; KSA, 11:224). Its animating idea is that we are “one and all self-seeking [*eigennütziges*] cattle and mob” (WP, 752; KSA, 11:224). The unconstrained “will to truth,” in longing for communion with The Truth as a kind of ersatz beatific vision, “*affirms another world* than that of life, nature, and history” (GM, III:25). The French revolution is the “world historical expression” of the “duality of idealist and rabble,” that Nietzsche thinks is personified in Rousseau, “this first modern man...sick with unbridled vanity and unbridled self-contempt” (TI, “Skirmishes,” 48). Nietzsche’s concern, I have tried to argue, is not here with morality’s bad effects *only*. It is also with what is enshrined and expressed in morality.

Morality’s expressive character diverges from what by Nietzsche’s lights are the true values. But there are various ways of diverging from the truth, when it comes to values. Mere falsity is not the problem here. What’s distinctive is that these are downright *perversions* of the real values by Nietzsche’s lights: Instead of this world and life, they celebrate a beyond and another life. Instead of expressing strength, they express weakness. Cowardice in place of bravery. Humility in place of pride. Baseness instead of nobility. Equality instead of hierarchy. Bovine comfort instead of heroic striving. Self-deception instead of honesty. Elimination of the self instead of the artistic cultivation of the self. And



so on. It's not just that they valorize the wrong things. They valorize either *the opposite* of the right things. Or else they get on to the right things, but in some grotesquely perverse extreme: healthy self-regard becomes cosmic narcissism; healthy self-mastery becomes self-tyranny, beneficial pruning of drives becomes a tyrannical obsession with extirpation, repression, castration of the drives entirely, the ability to take sustenance in beneficial illusions collapses into a life whose highest ideals are utter delusions. Morality's evaluative compass is seriously out of whack, when it comes to tracking the values. It's not just that the needle is broken or wildly erratic. It's that it systematically points to the *anti-values*.

In the "Preface" to the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche asks: Have moral values "hitherto hindered or furthered human flourishing? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or is there revealed in them, on the contrary, the plentitude, force, and will of life, its courage, certainty, future" (GM, "Preface," 3). He might be read here as raising a question simply about the effects of morality on the flourishing of humanity. But notice what he literally says. He asks, in addition, what *the values themselves* are a "sign" of. He asks what is "revealed" *in them*. There are two objects of study here: the effects of the values on human flourishing (quite mixed, as we have seen) and the values themselves as *meaning-bearing entities to be interpreted*. I have suggested that this act of interpretation, carried out in the *Genealogy* and in Nietzsche's other main texts, seeks, among other things to reveal and to criticize the expressive character of these values themselves.

## V. Conclusion

Now to conclude: On the central exegetical question, I've tried to show that the Effects Interpretation has several difficulties, and further, I've tried to show that it can't

make good sense of the *extent* of Nietzsche's criticism of morality. This criticism is considerably more thoroughgoing than the Effects Interpretation allows. Even if morality's effects were, by Nietzsche's lights, uniformly beneficial (as of course they are not), he would still, on my reading, have complaints to voice. I've presented an alternative that seeks to capture this other strong strand we see in Nietzsche's work, the strand focused on the expressive character of the institution of morality.

But what are we to make, philosophically, of all these construals of Nietzsche's, where he is alleging to uncover the expressive character of various moral phenomena? After all, we might interpret the institution of morality very differently from the way that Nietzsche does. We could see morality as expressing love and concern for others. We could see it as expressing hope for a better and truly more just world. We might, more generally, be concerned that the expressive character of the ideals, symbols, and practices of morality is simply too murky and subject to controversy to bear any philosophical and critical weight. That is a serious worry, and not one that can be fully allayed. But I would say that we shouldn't see his controversial interpretations as aspiring to be the comprehensive truth. Interpretations, he would be the first to admit, are partial, in both senses of that word. His gripping, sometimes inflammatory interpretations often involve deliberate hyperbole on his part, bringing out, though selective emphasis, one aspect of complex phenomena, leaving other aspects to recede from view.

With some of his interpretations anyway, we might find them convincing and disagree at a different stage. We might thus go along with him and see morality as expressing, for example, the dignity and equality of all—but think, very naturally, *that this is a good thing*. The disagreement comes in the underlying values we hold. Nietzsche's criticism,

it might be thought, is hereby faced with what has been posed as an “authority” problem:<sup>37</sup> How can Nietzsche’s criticisms of morality have force, unless we share his background value commitments? Do his complaints, insofar as they fail to resonate with our antecedent commitments, simply fall on deaf ears?

There are undeniably difficult issues here, which I cannot treat adequately. But I think, as a start, we must keep separate a descriptive issue (*will* anyone’s mind be changed by Nietzsche’s critique? And if so, whose minds and why?) with a genuinely normative one (do Nietzschean considerations, on his view, *warrant* anyone changing her mind, putting normative pressure on her to do so?). In assessing how (or whether) the latter question is even apposite when it comes to Nietzsche, we quickly begin to get into issues of his meta-ethics and meta-axiology—specifically, does Nietzsche think that his own preferred values have any potential claim to accuracy over the value claims of Judeo-Christian morality? Is he taking himself to be getting something right (at least to be getting closer to the truth), in contrast to others who are getting things wrong? Or is it just a bare clash of preferences, none with any claim to authority?

My own view is that the reports of Nietzsche’s blanket axiological skepticism are greatly exaggerated. And similarly I wonder whether the internalist constraint sometimes attributed to Nietzsche—that a value must be anchored in the commitments of my evaluative perspective to have normative authority over me—is one that Nietzsche really himself accepts, given his criticism of certain evaluative perspectives as downright erroneous (A, 9). Can something truly be a value (especially a value for me), regardless of my particular attitudes toward it and regardless of my commitments being in tension with it? I don’t think

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<sup>37</sup> This formulation is due to Aaron Ridley, “Nietzsche and the Re-Evaluation of Values,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (1) 155-175 (2005).

he means to deny this. But these are matters I take up elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Whether—and if so, to what extent—Nietzsche’s criticisms will have genuine normative authority for others will depend on where one stands on these issues in the background.

Yet these tricky meta-axiological matters aside, there is definitely a puzzle about why Nietzsche proceeds philosophically in the way that he does. What is he seeking to accomplish? It is clearly more than just to relate facts in a dispassionate manner. His goal is to change (at least some) hearts and minds, and if he is to accomplish that goal, he must take into account what his audience is going to find persuasive (both intellectually and rhetorically). One reason he puts such an emphasis on the *mendacity* inherent in morality (e.g., GM I:14), for example, is that he realizes that morality, and its adherents, also highly prize a commitment to truthfulness and that this will be a compelling consideration for them.<sup>39</sup> With truthfulness, it is more apparent that Nietzsche and his central opponents are on common axiological ground. But how about when it comes to pride, rank-ordering, domination, strength, bravery, bodily sensuality, even ruthlessness? In complaining that the Judeo-Christian tradition and what follows in its wake don’t express these values, and express competing values instead, does Nietzsche have a criticism that will have any sway over his opponents? Part of what Nietzsche is up to, in presenting these Nietzschean values in a vivid and appealing way, is to remind us just how much these values can and do still resonate with us, and to remind us how they have gotten short shrift in the moral tradition.

When it comes to the values that Nietzsche is criticizing—selflessness, humility, pity, equality—and the institutions and practices that manifest these ideals, I don’t think he is

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<sup>38</sup> See my \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>39</sup> This idea of Nietzsche using truthfulness as an anchor of critique is brought out well in David Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 134.

trying to engineer wholesale rejection of them (even by Nietzschean higher types.) His fulminations are often an exercise in provocation, meant to shake up our complacent attitudes and get us to reevaluate our commitments, instead of making us abandon all of these commitments entirely. Part of what he is trying to encourage is more ambivalence to these values, and the institutions that realize them, than we might otherwise have. It is not just (or mainly) a matter of getting us to alter how we act, though surely Nietzsche wanted to change that on some level. He is as interested, if not more so, in engaging and thereby changing our attitudes and our affects.<sup>40</sup> “We have to *learn to think differently*— in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*” (D, 103). And Nietzsche, on my view, is trying to get us to change our feelings not simply because different, more Nietzschean attitudes will have better downstream effects, but because our attitudes are presently out of line with what the objects of these attitudes warrant. Do humility and equality deserve as much admiration as we give them? And do domination and power deserve as little? I see Nietzsche as trying to readjust things on this front.

From his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* to his final works of 1888, Nietzsche set his course as a social and cultural critic, concerned with diagnosing and countering what he perceived to be the decadence of Western civilization. This guiding concern and project of Nietzsche’s, and the strategies that he mobilizes in support of it, can be difficult to assimilate into the ways of doing philosophy that are acceptable in most philosophical circles today. Where we expect arguments, he gives impassioned interpretations and re-interpretations. Where we expect a full-blown theory, we get isolated *bons mots*. Where we expect a measured tone, he goes in for extremes. And not all of this is the fault simply of

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<sup>40</sup> See Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy* (Oxford, 2007), Ch. 6

incautious excess, but some of it is bound up with the distinctive philosophical project that Nietzsche is seeking to undertake.

Yet, even accounting for this, if we think Nietzsche's objections to morality are *still* too one-sided and overwrought to take on board as the full truth, as we no doubt on some level should, I do think the *style* of broadly ethical and ideological criticism in evidence in Nietzsche's critique of morality is worth thinking about much more. We are accustomed to assessing the permissibility of discrete actions, judging outcomes of actions as beneficial or harmful, assessing individual traits of character, and the like. This all clearly falls within the purview of ethics and moral psychology. But Nietzsche, interestingly, directs attention to the character of *suprapersonal* entities too—the phenomena of the socio-historical institution of morality most notably—and he renders an ethical verdict on them. It is in this respect that his approach is most strikingly modern, prefiguring and perhaps influencing the sort of social criticism that would become a staple in various strands of 20th century continental philosophy and cultural criticism. Nietzsche is exploiting an important logical space in leveling ethical or evaluative charges that criticize not just individuals but also broader practices and institutions too. And that criticize these institutions not just on account of their effects, but on account of their expressive character as well. His mode of critique is something we need to account for, and make more use of, in contemporary social, ethical, and political philosophy, if not to further Nietzsche's own values exactly, then to further whatever admixture of Nietzschean values and Judeo-Christian moral values better approximates the truth about things, if indeed there is one.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> My thanks to \_\_\_\_\_.

## Works Cited

### Primary Literature

Works by Nietzsche are cited by section number using the following abbreviations and translations, which I have modified where I've thought appropriate.

A= *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
BGE= *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
BT= *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs  
D= *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale  
EH= *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
GM= *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
GS= *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
“Greek State”=“The Greek State,” trans. Carol Diethe  
HH= *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale  
TI= *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
TSZ= *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
UM= *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale

In works that comprise several individual essays, after the abbreviation is the essay number (as a Roman numeral) and section number (as an arabic numeral). For example, GM, I:2 is *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, Section 2. In works that include titled main sections, I include a key word for that section, followed by subsection numbers, if applicable. For example, TI, "Socrates," 1 is the *Twilight of the Idols* section "The Problem of Socrates," sub-section 1

For the German I rely on the following, cited by volume and page number.  
KSA= Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. Colli and Montinari (de Gruyter).