BOOK SUMMARY

On the Genealogy of Morality

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Three essays on the formation of moral values, guilt, and ascetic ideals.

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Key ideas

1. **Ressentiment.** The powerless, unable to act on their hatred, created a morality that calls the strong evil and their own weakness good.
2. **Guilt and bad conscience.** Guilt grew out of debt, and the bad conscience out of aggressive instincts that, blocked by society, turned against the self.
3. **Origin is not purpose.** A custom like punishment is reinterpreted again and again, so its present purpose tells us nothing about how it began.
4. **The ascetic ideal.** Giving suffering a meaning can sustain life while also turning it against the body, the senses and the earth.
5. **The value of values.** Moral values must themselves be questioned, since what we call good may be a narcotic that weakens humanity's future.

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Preface

The preface, dated Sils Maria, July 1887, opens by turning the question of knowledge on the knower. We are unknown to ourselves, Nietzsche says, because we have never looked for ourselves. Like honey-gatherers of the spirit, we care only about bringing something home to the hive, and when we try to count the strokes of our own experience afterward, like someone woken by a bell at noon, we cannot. Then he announces his subject: the origin of our moral prejudices. The question had haunted him since he was thirteen, when he made God the father of evil, and it had appeared in earlier books, especially Human, All Too Human.

Nietzsche says the immediate provocation was a book by his former friend Paul Rée, The Origin of the Moral Sensations (1877), which he calls a perverse example of the “English” style of moral genealogy. He did not want to refute it but to replace improbable hypotheses with more probable ones. His deeper concern was with his old teacher Schopenhauer and the value he placed on the “unegoistic” instincts of pity, self-denial and self-sacrifice. In those instincts Nietzsche came to see the great danger to humanity: a will turning against life, and the beginning of a new European Buddhism, a nihilism.

This leads to the book’s new demand. We need a critique of moral values; the value of these values must for the first time be called into question. For that we need knowledge of the conditions under which they grew and changed: morality as symptom, mask, hypocrisy, illness and misunderstanding, but also as cause, remedy, stimulant and restraint. Perhaps, he suggests, what is called “good” is a danger, a narcotic by which the present lives at the expense of the future. If so, morality itself would be to blame if the highest power and splendor possible to the human type were never reached. That possibility is what the three essays set out to test.

Against the airy speculation he associates with English theorists, Nietzsche wants a genealogy written in grey: what can be documented, what has really existed, the long hieroglyphic record of humanity’s moral past. He ends with advice on reading. If the book seems obscure, readers should first study his earlier works, and they must learn to treat an aphorism as something that needs interpretation. The third essay, he says, is an example of how to expound one: it is a commentary on the aphorism placed at its head. Reading well requires rumination, for which one must almost be a cow rather than a modern person.

CHAPTER 1

First Essay: “Good and Evil,” “Good and Bad” (§1–5)

The first essay begins with the “English psychologists,” the moral historians Nietzsche credits with at least trying to write a history of morality. They are interesting as people, he says, because they keep looking for the decisive forces in human life in the most embarrassing places: habit, forgetfulness, blind association of ideas. But their account of “good” is unhistorical. On their view, people originally praised unselfish acts as good because they were useful to those who received them; later the origin of the praise was forgotten, and unselfish acts came to feel good in themselves.

Nietzsche’s first objection is that the judgment “good” did not come from those to whom good was done. It came from the good themselves: the noble, powerful and high-minded, who felt themselves and their actions to be first-rate in contrast to everything low, common and plebeian. From this “pathos of distance” they took the right to create values and coin names for them. Utility had nothing to do with it. Nietzsche even suggests that language itself began as an expression of power by rulers who said “this is so” and sealed things with a sound.

His second objection is psychological. If unselfish acts had always been useful, their usefulness could not have been forgotten; it would have been confirmed every day. Herbert Spencer’s version, which equates good with what has always proved useful, is at least more reasonable, but it is still wrong about where the concept comes from. The opposition of “egoistic” and “unegoistic” only pushes itself into the human conscience when aristocratic values decline and the herd instinct finally speaks. Before that, Nietzsche insists, the noble simply did not measure their actions by whether they helped others; they measured them by whether they were worthy of themselves.

Nietzsche’s guide, he says, was etymology. In many languages the words for “good” lead back to “noble” and “aristocratic,” while the words for “bad” lead back to “common” and “low.” German “schlecht” (bad) is related to “schlicht” (plain, simple). The Greek nobility, whose voice Nietzsche hears in the poet Theognis, called themselves the truthful, and he links the Greek esthlos to “one who is real.” Latin “malus” may point to the dark-haired pre-Aryan population, and “bonus” to the warrior. These etymologies are speculative, and many of them are rejected by modern linguists, but they serve his thesis that moral words began as markers of social rank.

CHAPTER 2

First Essay: The Priestly Revaluation (§6–9)

Where the highest caste is also a priestly caste, Nietzsche continues, the social contrast of good and bad takes a new form: “clean” and “unclean.” At first these are crude and literal, meaning someone who washes, avoids certain foods or does not sleep with women of the lower orders. But priestly aristocracies are unhealthy from the start, with their brooding, fasting and withdrawal from action, and their remedies, from diets to the Brahmin’s absorption into nothingness, are often worse than the illness. Still, Nietzsche concedes, it was on the soil of this priestly form of existence that man first became an interesting animal, and that the human soul gained depth and became evil.

Priestly valuation can split off from the knightly aristocratic mode and become its opposite. Knightly values rest on a powerful body, overflowing health, war, adventure, hunting, dancing and everything that belongs to strong, free and joyful action. Priests are powerless in these things, and their powerlessness breeds a hatred that is the most spiritual and poisonous of all. The greatest haters in history, and the cleverest, have been priests. Compared with the cleverness of priestly revenge, Nietzsche says, every other kind of cleverness is practically negligible, and human history would be a dull affair without the cleverness the weak have brought into it.

Nietzsche’s historical example is ancient Israel, which he calls the priestly people par excellence. Unable to defeat its enemies, it took revenge through a radical revaluation of their values, an act of the most spiritual revenge. With fearful consistency it reversed the aristocratic equation of good, noble, powerful, beautiful, happy and beloved of God, and declared that the wretched alone are good: the poor, the powerless, the lowly, the suffering, the sick. The powerful and noble became the evil, the cruel, the godless, the eternally damned. With this, Nietzsche writes, quoting his own Beyond Good and Evil, the slave revolt in morality begins, a revolt two thousand years old that we no longer see only because it has been victorious.

In §8 Nietzsche makes a disturbing claim. Out of this tree of vengeance grew a new love, the love Jesus of Nazareth preached to the poor and sick. Was this love the opposite of Israel’s hatred, or its crown? Perhaps, he suggests, Israel’s secret policy of revenge was to deny its own instrument publicly and nail it to the cross, so that the whole world would take the bait. In §9 an imagined free spirit answers that the people, or the slaves, or the herd, have won, and that everything is becoming Judaized, Christianized or mobbified. Nietzsche lets him speak and declines, for now, to say more.

CHAPTER 3

First Essay: Ressentiment and the Noble Type (§10–12)

Section 10 is the theoretical center of the first essay. The slave revolt, Nietzsche says, begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values. (Samuel's translation renders Nietzsche's French word as "resentment.") This is the ressentiment of creatures denied the true reaction of action, who compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. Noble morality grows from a triumphant yes to itself; slave morality says no from the start to what is outside, different, not itself. Its creative deed is that no. It needs a hostile outside world in order to act at all, so its action is fundamentally reaction.

The difference shows in the two moralities' treatment of the other. When the noble mode errs, it does so through contempt, carelessness or impatience; it pictures the low as unhappy and pitiable rather than wicked. The Greek nobles even used sorrowful words like "deilos" for the common people. The noble are happy because they act, and they do not need to construct their happiness by looking resentfully at their enemies. The man of ressentiment is neither upright nor naive, and his soul squints. He loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, and he is more cunning than the noble because cleverness is his condition of survival.

A strong, full nature shakes off insults it would brood over. Nietzsche's example is Mirabeau, who had no memory for insults and could not forgive simply because he forgot. Only such a person is capable of real love for his enemies, since he respects them and wants an enemy in whom there is much to honor. The man of ressentiment instead conceives "the evil enemy" as his basic idea, and from it, as an afterthought, he derives a "good one," himself. The noble man works the other way around: he first conceives "good" spontaneously from himself, and only then forms an idea of "bad" as a pale contrast. The same word, "good," therefore means very different things in the two moralities.

In §11 Nietzsche describes the noble races as beasts of prey who, among their equals, are restrained by custom, respect and jealousy, but who toward strangers become uncaged, like the "magnificent blonde brute" roaming for spoil and victory. He lists Roman, Arab, Germanic and Japanese nobility, Homeric heroes and Scandinavian Vikings, and says the image has nothing to do with modern Germans. The phrase was later misused by Nazi propagandists. Nietzsche's real point in the passage is that the taming and domestication called civilization has produced a

smaller, tamer human being. In §12 he admits that the sight of man now tires us. What is nihilism today, he asks, if not that? We are tired of man.

CHAPTER 4

First Essay: Lambs, Birds of Prey and Rome against Judea (§13–17)

Section 13 offers the essay's most famous parable. Lambs dislike birds of prey, which is understandable, but that is no reason to blame the birds for carrying off lambs. When the lambs say among themselves that birds of prey are evil, and whoever is least like a bird of prey, a lamb, is good, there is nothing wrong with the ideal itself. The birds may look down a little mockingly and say they bear the good lambs no grudge; nothing tastes better than a tender lamb. To demand that strength not express itself as strength is as absurd as to demand that weakness express itself as strength.

The trick that makes this demand plausible, Nietzsche argues, is grammatical. Ordinary language separates the lightning from its flash, as if there were a subject behind the deed that could choose to act or not. But there is no being behind the doing; the doer is a fiction added to the deed. Ressentiment exploits this fiction. It pretends that the strong are free to be weak and the bird of prey free to be a lamb, so that it can hold them responsible, and it calls its own weakness, which cannot be otherwise, a free and meritorious choice.

Section 14 is a small drama. Nietzsche invites the reader to peer into the dark workshop where ideals are manufactured. A voice reports what it hears: weakness is being lied into merit, impotence that does not retaliate into goodness, timid lowliness into humility, inability to take revenge into not wanting revenge and even forgiveness. These people say they are better than the powerful, and they call their final revenge the Last Judgment and the coming of the kingdom of God. In §15 Nietzsche cites Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that the blessed in heaven will see the punishments of the damned so that their bliss may please them more, and then a long, gloating passage from the church father Tertullian about the spectacle of the final judgment.

Section 16 draws the conclusion. The two opposed values, good and bad, good and evil, have fought a terrible battle on earth for thousands of years, under the title "Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome." Judea won: in Rome today, people bow before three Jews and one Jewess, Jesus, Peter, Paul and Mary. The Renaissance saw a brief reawakening of the classical ideal, but the Reformation, a movement Nietzsche calls plebeian and resentful, and later the French Revolution, defeated it again. Then came Napoleon, whom Nietzsche calls a synthesis of "Monster and Superman," the incarnate problem of the noble ideal. In §17 he clarifies the motto

of his previous book: “Beyond Good and Evil” does not mean “Beyond Good and Bad.” He ends with a note proposing an academic prize question on how linguistics and physiology can illuminate the history of moral concepts.

CHAPTER 5

Second Essay: “Guilt,” “Bad Conscience” and the Like: The Animal That Can Promise (§1–3)

The second essay opens with a question: is not breeding an animal entitled to make promises the paradoxical task nature set itself with man? It is all the more remarkable because forgetfulness is not mere inertia but an active, positive power of repression. It keeps the doorways of consciousness shut for a while and makes room for new things, especially for the nobler functions of ruling, foreseeing and planning. Without forgetting there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride or present. A person in whom this inhibiting apparatus is damaged is like a dyspeptic, unable to finish with anything.

This necessarily forgetful animal has bred in itself an opposite capacity, a memory, so that it can promise. That requires that the future be made calculable and regular, and above all that man become calculable to himself. Here Nietzsche introduces the “morality of custom” (a phrase from his earlier book Daybreak), the enormous prehistoric labor through which human beings were made uniform and predictable with the help of social straitjackets. At the end of that long process, as its ripest fruit, stands the sovereign individual, who resembles only himself, has broken away from the morality of custom, and possesses his own independent will.

Such a person has the right to make promises. He knows his superiority over those who cannot, carries his own measure of value, honors those who are like him and keeps his word even against accidents and fate. His proud awareness of this rare freedom and power over himself and over fate has become an instinct, the dominant instinct, and he calls it his conscience. Nietzsche does not present the sovereign individual as a moralist. He uses the term “super-moral,” since autonomy and the morality of custom exclude each other.

But conscience has a long and dark prehistory. How do you make a memory for the human animal? Nietzsche’s answer is pain. “Only that which never stops hurting remains in his memory” is, he says, an axiom of the oldest psychology on earth. Whenever people felt the need to make a memory, there were blood, torture and sacrifices. He catalogs old German punishments, stoning, breaking on the wheel, impaling, quartering, flaying, to show how much cruelty it took to teach a few “I will nots” to the forgetful. Reason, seriousness and mastery of the emotions were bought at that price, and that, he says, is why so much blood and horror lie at the bottom of all good things.

CHAPTER 6

Second Essay: Debt, Cruelty and Justice (§4–11)

Where, then, did the consciousness of guilt come from? Nietzsche points to a fact of the German language: Schuld means both “guilt” and “debt.” The moral concept of guilt, he argues, grew out of the very material concept of owing. For most of human history punishment was not inflicted because the wrongdoer was held responsible. It was inflicted the way parents still punish children, out of anger at a harm suffered, an anger kept within limits by the idea that every injury has an equivalent and can be paid back, even in the pain of the offender.

That idea of equivalence comes from the oldest relationship of all, between creditor and debtor. A debtor pledged something he still had, his body, his wife, his freedom, even his rest in the grave. In Egypt creditors could disturb a dead debtor’s peace; the Roman Twelve Tables allowed creditors to cut flesh from a defaulting debtor. Nietzsche asks what kind of repayment this is, and answers that it compensates with pleasure: the creditor gets to make someone suffer, to share for a moment in the rights of masters. Cruelty, he insists, was a festival of early humanity, and the gods of the Greeks were imagined as spectators who enjoyed it.

Nietzsche adds that suffering probably hurt less then, and that the modern revolt against suffering is in part a revolt against senseless suffering. What outrages people is not pain but its meaninglessness, and both the Christian, who read a hidden saving purpose into it, and the ancient, who made gods its spectators, invented ways to make it meaningful. In §8 he widens the creditor-debtor relation: buying, selling, measuring and exchanging were so basic that man may be the animal who measures values, and the first moral judgments were judgments of price.

The community itself stands to its members as a creditor. It gives them protection and peace, and a lawbreaker is a debtor who not only fails to repay but attacks his creditor. He is cast back into the outlawed state. As a community grows stronger, it takes offenses less seriously, shields the offender from the anger of the injured, and treats crimes as payable. A society could become so rich in power that it lets its offenders go unpunished, and justice ends, like every good thing on earth, by overcoming itself. This self-overcoming of justice goes by a beautiful name, grace or mercy, and it remains the privilege of the most powerful.

Section 11 rejects the theory, popular with Eugen Dühring and others, that justice grows out of ressentiment and revenge. Ressentiment, Nietzsche says, is the last soil justice could grow in. The active, aggressive person is closer to justice than the reactive one, because he does not need

to falsify his object. Historically, law was created by the strong to restrain the reactive feelings and to replace private revenge with fixed equivalents. Right and wrong exist only once law is established, and from the highest biological standpoint, legal conditions can only ever be exceptional states, partial restrictions of the will to power, not a universal rule.

CHAPTER 7

Second Essay: The Origin and Purpose of Punishment (§12–15)

Section 12 contains Nietzsche's most important methodological principle. The origin of a thing and its eventual use lie worlds apart. Whatever exists is again and again reinterpreted, taken over and redirected by some superior power, so that all events in the organic world are acts of overpowering and becoming master, and every overpowering is a reinterpretation. The "purpose" of an organ or a custom tells us nothing about where it came from. Its history is a chain of new interpretations, not progress toward a goal. The eye was not made for seeing, nor punishment invented for punishing; such purposes arrive later and overwrite what came before, often with resistance and loss.

Against the idea of mere passive adaptation, which he associates with Herbert Spencer, Nietzsche says this view misses the essence of life, its will to power, and overlooks the primacy of spontaneous, aggressive, form-giving forces. Applied to punishment, the principle means separating two things: the relatively enduring procedure itself, the act and drama of punishing, and the fluid meaning or purpose attached to it. The procedure is older than any of its uses. People did not invent punishment in order to punish; rather, an ancient practice of inflicting pain was later given one meaning after another, and each new meaning was read back into its origin by naive historians.

Today, Nietzsche observes, the concept of punishment no longer has one meaning but a whole synthesis of meanings, so tangled that it cannot be defined; only something without a history can be defined. He offers a list of what punishment has meant: rendering harmless, payment of damages, isolating a disturbance, inspiring fear, compensation for advantages enjoyed, expelling a degenerate element, a festival of triumph over a defeated enemy, making a memory, a fee to the power that protects the offender from vengeance, a compromise with revenge, and a declaration of war.

One supposed purpose he rejects outright: that punishment awakens guilt and remorse. Genuine remorse is rare among criminals, he notes, and prisons are not where its worm breeds. Punishment hardens and chills, sharpens the sense of alienation and strengthens resistance. The offender sees the same acts he is punished for, spying, deceit, violence, done by the justice system itself with a good conscience. For thousands of years wrongdoers regarded their fate as a misfortune, not a sin, and Spinoza, Nietzsche adds, ended by defining the bite of conscience as a

sadness at the memory of something that turned out contrary to expectation. Offenders felt “here is something which went wrong,” not “I ought not to have done this.” Punishment tames man; it does not make him better.

CHAPTER 8

Second Essay: The Bad Conscience and the Debt to God (§16–25)

Section 16 offers Nietzsche's own hypothesis. The bad conscience is a deep illness that human beings contracted under the most fundamental change they ever experienced, when they found themselves locked within the walls of society and peace. Like sea creatures forced to become land animals or die, these half-animals, adapted to war, wandering and adventure, suddenly found their instincts devalued. They were reduced to thinking, calculating and relying on their weakest organ, consciousness. Their old instincts did not stop making demands, so they turned inward. This internalization is how the human soul first grew depth and breadth. Hostility, cruelty, the pleasure in persecution and destruction, all turned against their owner: that is the origin of the bad conscience.

This change was not gradual or voluntary, Nietzsche insists, but a break, an inescapable fate. The oldest state was a terrible tyranny, a herd of blonde beasts of prey, a conquering race that fell upon a larger, shapeless population and gave it form. The theory that the state began in a contract is, he says, finished. These organizers knew nothing of guilt or responsibility. But the bad conscience grew among those they subdued, from the instinct for freedom forced back and imprisoned within. Nietzsche refuses to despise it. The bad conscience is an illness, but an illness the way pregnancy is an illness, and it has brought an abundance of new beauty and affirmation into the world.

Sections 19 to 22 trace how this inward cruelty fused with religion. Early tribes felt a debt to their ancestors, who founded them and whose spirits went on giving protection; the more powerful a tribe became, the greater the debt, until the ancestors grew into gods. The rise of the Christian God, the maximum god so far, brought with it the maximum feeling of guilt. The ideas of guilt and duty were then moralized and turned back on the debtor, until the debt seemed unpayable and eternal punishment followed. Christianity's stroke of genius, Nietzsche writes, was God sacrificing himself for man's guilt, the creditor paying for the debtor out of love.

Here Nietzsche sees human self-torture reach its height. Man finds in God the extreme opposite of his own animal instincts, interprets those instincts as guilt before God, and whips himself with the idea of a holy God and a hell. In contrast, §23 points to the Greeks, who used their gods to keep the bad conscience at bay: when a man did something terrible, a god must have deceived him, so the gods took on the guilt rather than the punishment. The essay ends (§24

and §25) by imagining a man of the future, a redeemer from both the old ideal and the nihilism that follows it, who would give the earth its goal again: an Antichrist and anti-nihilist, a conqueror of God and of nothingness. Then Nietzsche stops himself, saying that this belongs to Zarathustra the godless.

CHAPTER 9

Third Essay: What Is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals? Artists and Philosophers (§1–10)

The third essay opens with a line from Zarathustra and a question: what do ascetic ideals mean? For artists, nothing, or too many things. For philosophers and scholars, something like a sense of the most favorable conditions for high spirituality. For women, an extra charm. For the physiologically unfortunate, an attempt to see themselves as "too good" for this world. For priests, the real priestly faith and their best instrument of power. For saints, a pretext for hibernation. That the ascetic ideal has meant so much to human beings, Nietzsche says, reveals the basic fact of the human will, its horror of a vacuum. It needs a goal, and it would rather will nothingness than not will.

He starts with the artist, taking Richard Wagner as his case. Why did Wagner, who once planned an opera about Luther's wedding in praise of sensuality, end by paying homage to chastity in Parsifal? Nietzsche half wishes Parsifal were a satyr play, Wagner laughing at himself, but fears it was meant seriously. His conclusion is that artists are not independent enough to matter here. They have always been the valets of some morality, philosophy or religion, and Wagner adopted Schopenhauer's philosophy after reading it, finding in it a new prestige for music as the voice of the world itself.

This leads to the philosophers. Schopenhauer followed Kant in defining beauty as what pleases "without interest," and Nietzsche sets against it Stendhal's definition of beauty as "a promise of happiness." Schopenhauer, he argues, valued aesthetic contemplation because it gave him relief from the torment of sexual desire; it was precisely an interest. And his philosophy depended on his enemies, Hegel and women, sensuality and the will to existence, which kept him cheerful. The philosopher, Nietzsche says, hates marriage as an obstacle to his optimum, and he notes that Heraclitus, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Schopenhauer were unmarried.

When philosophers praise poverty, humility and chastity, then, they are not denying existence but affirming the conditions of their own best existence, the way every animal instinctively seeks its optimum. Such asceticism serves their dominant instinct, spirituality, and is a disguise rather than a creed. For a long time philosophy could only survive by dressing as the ascetic priest. The contemplative person was regarded with suspicion, and early philosophers had to inspire fear in themselves and others through self-imposed cruelty. Has this changed? Nietzsche doubts that the winged creature of the spirit has fully emerged from its caterpillar.

CHAPTER 10

Third Essay: The Ascetic Priest and the Sick Herd (§11–16)

Now Nietzsche turns to the real representative of the ascetic ideal, the ascetic priest. For him the ideal is not a means but his whole life, and his power depends on it. He treats life as a wrong path that one must walk back to its beginning, a bridge to another existence. This self-contradiction, life against life, is everywhere on earth. It is a ressentiment without equal, which tries to master not something in life but life itself, and it takes pleasure in failure, decay, pain and self-mortification. The more its own physiological capacity for life declines, the more triumphant and confident it grows.

When this priestly evaluation enters philosophy, it attacks the senses and even reason, and Nietzsche uses the occasion to state his perspectivism. Let us guard against "pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subjects" and against "pure reason" and "knowledge in itself," which require an eye that looks in no particular direction. There is only perspectival seeing and perspectival knowing. The more feelings we let speak about a thing, the more eyes we use, the more complete our "objectivity" will be. To abolish the will altogether would be to castrate the intellect.

How can life turn against life? Nietzsche's answer (§13) is that the ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life, which uses it to fight for its existence. The ascetic priest is the incarnate wish to be different and elsewhere, but his very power makes him a preserver of the sick. Man, the sick animal, is more uncertain, changeable and undetermined than any other, and his sickness is linked to his daring. The danger, §14 says, is not the strong but the sick, who poison the happy with their misery and their claim to moral superiority. The healthy must be kept apart from them, so that the pathos of distance survives.

Here the ascetic priest appears as the predestined savior, shepherd and advocate of the sick herd. He is himself sick, so that he understands them, yet strong enough to rule them. He protects them against the healthy and against themselves, especially against the explosive ressentiment that builds up in every herd. His great trick is to change the direction of that ressentiment. Every sufferer looks for a cause, someone to blame for his pain. The priest agrees that someone is to blame, and tells the sheep that it is himself. This is bold and false, but it achieves something: the ressentiment is turned back on its owner and made harmless to the herd.

CHAPTER 11

Third Essay: The Priest's Medicines (§17–22)

Is the ascetic priest really a physician? Nietzsche's answer is that he fights only the suffering itself, the discomfort of the sufferer, not its cause, so he is not a true doctor. Much of what he treats is a widespread physiological depression, which may come from mixing of races and classes, emigration to unsuitable climates, exhaustion, bad diet and disease. The priest interprets it morally and offers remedies that relieve without curing. Nietzsche sorts these into "innocent" and "guilty" methods. He adds a characteristic warning about himself and his fellow psychologists: they too may still be "too good" for their work, infected by the moralizing they study, and should mistrust their first impulses.

The innocent methods are four. First, reducing the feeling of life to its lowest point: no wanting, no wishing, no love, no hate, a kind of hibernation. He compares it to the Buddhist and Vedanta ideals of release from good and evil. Second, mechanical activity, absolute regularity and obedience, which the modern world calls the "blessing of work." Third, the prescription of a small, easily available joy, especially the joy of doing good and giving pleasure, which awakens a little will to power. Fourth, the formation of a herd, the community of the weak, in which each person's disgust with himself is drowned in pleasure at the community's growth.

The guilty methods all aim at one thing: a debauch of feeling, an emotional excess used as an anesthetic against slow, dull pain. Anger, fear, lust, revenge, hope, triumph, despair and cruelty are all summoned, and the main tool is the sense of guilt. The priest reinterprets the sufferer's pain as punishment for sin. The sick man becomes a sinner, and for centuries the picture is the same: the sinner breaking himself on the wheel of a restless, morbidly lascivious conscience. Nietzsche lists the results in medieval history: epidemics of epilepsy, St. Vitus dances, witch hysteria, mass delirium of the death-seeking.

Nietzsche's judgment is that this system made the sick sicker and corrupted the health of the soul wherever it ruled. It also corrupted taste, and his example is the New Testament, which he finds full of petty intimacy and impertinence toward God, while he admires the Old Testament for its great people, heroic landscapes and strong hearts. The ascetic ideal has spoiled health and taste and many other things besides, he says. His real question, though, is not what it has done but what it means, what lies behind it, and why it has had such power.

CHAPTER 12

Third Essay: Science, the Will to Truth and the Meaning of the Ascetic Ideal (§23–28)

The ascetic ideal has one goal, Nietzsche says, and it interprets every age, people and person in its light. Where is its opposite? Modern science might seem to be its rival, having no God, no beyond and no need of self-denying virtues. Nietzsche rejects this. Science is not independent enough; it needs an ideal of value to serve, and never creates values itself. Where it is not merely a hiding place for the restless and discontented, it is the latest and noblest form of the ascetic ideal, because it rests on an unconditional faith in truth.

Even the boldest unbelievers of the present, the free spirits and atheists, are not free, Nietzsche says in §24, because they still believe in truth. He recalls the medieval order of the Assassins, whose highest secret was said to be "Nothing is true, everything is allowed," and asks whether any European free spirit has ever followed that maze to its end. The will to truth itself needs a critique; its value must be called into question. Art, in which the lie sanctifies itself, is more opposed to the ascetic ideal than science is, which is why Plato, the greatest enemy of art in Europe, stands against Homer.

Since Copernicus, Nietzsche adds, science has not freed man from the ascetic ideal but has strengthened his self-contempt, sending him rolling from the center into nothingness. Modern historians who refuse to judge, and the fashionable contemplatives and patriots who pose as their opposites, earn his scorn too. In §27 he makes his most striking historical claim. What defeated the Christian God was Christian morality itself, its ever stricter concept of truthfulness, sublimated into scientific conscience and intellectual cleanliness at any price. All great things perish through an act of self-overcoming. Christianity perished as dogma through its own morality, and now Christian morality must perish too, when the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a problem.

The final section gathers everything together. Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human animal, had no meaning. He was surrounded by a terrible void, did not know how to justify, explain or affirm himself, and suffered from the problem of his own meaning. His problem was not suffering itself but the absence of an answer to the question "why suffer?" The ascetic ideal gave suffering a meaning, the only one so far, and any meaning is better than none. It closed the door to suicidal nihilism. But it brought new suffering, deeper and more inward, and it

expressed a hatred of everything human, animal, material and sensual. Still, it was a will. The essay ends where it began: man would rather will nothingness than not will at all.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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