

An Exegesis Concerning On the Genealogy of Morals, Essay II

Friedrich Nietzsche reconstructs the human condition by putting the human instinct center to all things that charge us. In his second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals (OGM)*, titled “Guilt,” “Bad Conscience,” and the Like, Nietzsche catalogs the modern world’s control structure as a function of humanity’s necessary, stepwise adaptations from a time when delimiting man & woman from any other animal in the wild was impossible. The use of control, here and throughout this exegesis, is intentional so as to separate “power” from its usual connotation, which seemingly fits here, because Nietzschean power, in the form of *will to power*, is merely the “willing-to-become-stronger, willing growth”; yet, Essay II of *OGM* does look at “power” over other humans, so the distinction is necessary even with added context (Dunkle, *On the Normativity of Nietzsche's Will to Power*). After all, translator Walter Kaufmann notes: “[Nietzsche] loved words and phrases that mean one thing out of context and almost the opposite in the context he gives them” (*OGM* — Kaufmann Translation, Introduction, Section 3). This distinction leads to an important note on the significance of *OGM* Essay II: the themes of the work are products of *new* and frank evaluation of human behaviors of past, and as such, Nietzsche does not hold back when discussing cruelty, punishment, and justice. By focusing on specific portions of this ‘genealogy,’ one may find it easy to connect Nietzsche’s observations to class/race-based nationalist and/or fascist ideals. Though oft out of context, these connections are influential vindications for some ideologies that are predominantly viewed as harmful. Both for its effort to identify human interaction *truly* and its applications to harmful beliefs, *OGM*’s Second Essay is a worthwhile position to understand.

Conscience, or *Bad Conscience*

Nietzsche opens the essay in a probing fashion: “To breed an animal with the right to make promises — is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?” This will become the foundation of his ideals. Nietzsche posits that humans in animal form (pre-interaction, pre-interpersonal) were *forgetful*. Not necessarily forgetful in the sense that we humans kept no capacity for mental souvenir; rather, it’s that “we [were] conscious of what is going on as little as we [would be] with the entire thousand-fold process which our bodily nourishment goes through” — meaning our daily events weighed lightly on our mind just as digesting food does or breathing (*OGM* Essay II, Section 1). To have a *memory*, specifically a *memory of the will*, one foregoes the luxuries of pure happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, and presence that being forgetful brings us. It demands an interpersonal human to have memory because without it how could relations be upheld? When a human agrees with another to *exchange* goods or services, there can be no confidence in the other human to follow through should they be full of *forgetfulness* and no *memory*.

The *will to memory* is then the ability to promise; therefore, this *memory* is the source of the paradox. And as it becomes to Nietzsche, the implementation of the memory is the genesis of control structures in groups of people where one group can impart punishment on a person or persons for some violation. Nietzsche’s justification does follow an intense progression that need not be outlined here; however, there is an essential aspect to it: the creditor-debtor relationship.

The creditor-debtor relationship is built upon a promise that is made, through one's memory, where one promises to pay, in one way or another, someone else for something. It becomes "an obligation upon his [or her] own conscience," that a debtor *becomes* a debtor to its creditor (OGM Essay II, Section 4). And with that conscience, aware that his or her repayment is not or may not be met, the conscience becomes one coined a "*bad conscience*" because the debtor knows that punishment will be imparted unto them to an equivalent effort that they have caused injury to the creditor. Nietzsche notes too that "every injury has its equivalent, and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit" (OGM Essay II, Section 4).

This is an important point. Nietzsche is stating that pain can be the compensation a debtor owes. How though and in what way does pain benefit a creditor? The answer is that humans receive pleasure! Specifically, creditors receive pleasure when they impart control over someone who is without control (their debtor). It is "*faire le mal pour le plaisir de la faire*"¹ — the enjoyment of violating" (OGM Essay II, Section 5). This trait of human enjoyment for someone else's pain is what is called cruelty to Nietzsche. And when one can justify this cruelty, because he or she has credit to do so, they are exercising the *right of the masters*. And should you be a creditor of a low social class with the *right of the masters*, you will then enjoy your cruelty more so with a "foretaste of a higher rank" in the social order (OGM Essay II, Section 5).

What is most revealing about this cruelty Nietzsche speaks of is its connection to good behavior— a behavior inspired by the aforementioned *bad conscience*. Recall, promises need not be made through explicit agreement; for example, should someone injure another, there is

¹ French: "doing evil for the pleasure of doing it"

a right to assume this injurer owes the injured. And in this way, people in society must beware of their actions or they shall become a debtor. People must have “reason, seriousness, mastery over the affects, the whole somber thing called reflection” — people retain a *bad conscience* which is a force toward good. However, it is duly noted by Nietzsche that this force comes from the prospect of cruelty. He asks, “how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all ‘good things’?” (*OGM* Essay II, Section II). The relevance of this question is evidenced by Nietzsche with a long order of gory & brutal **punishments** that humans have engaged in throughout the histories of western civilizations.

Nietzsche would remind us, at this point, to recall how far humanity has come from the pre-historic human earlier considered: us humans now hold awareness for “irresponsible” behavior and *aim* to punish those who injure us — even if not existentially (even trivially!). Owing to this drastic change in human behavior and psyche is an ontological principle that “the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart” (*OGM*, Essay II, Section 12 & Section 14). The origin of punishment too, exercising the *right of masters* of a creditor, is also different from its current employment. Consider this: do law-bound, modern societies operate in the spirit of exchange agreements? Does the penal code disregard anyone who wishes not to be a member of society (that is built upon exchange agreements) and therefore enjoy impunity? The answer to both questions is no. One does not have the luxury to evade society’s requirements. And for he or she who wishes to, Nietzsche would say, it would not be unreasonable to imagine their distaste for control imparted on them: “it is precisely among criminals and convicts that the sting of conscience is extremely rare; prisons and penitentiaries are not the kinds of hotbed in which

this species of gnawing worm is likely to flourish” (OGM Essay II, Section 14). Nietzsche continues quite profoundly in the same section:

We must not underrate the extent to which the site of the judicial and executive procedures prevents the criminal from considering his deed, the type of his action as such, reprehensible: for he sees exactly the same kind of actions practiced in the service of justice and approved of and practiced with the good conscience: spying, deception, bribery, setting traps, the whole cunning and underhand art of police and prosecution, plus robbery, violence, defamation, imprisonment, torture, murder, practiced as a matter of principle and without even emotion to excuse them, which are pronounced characteristics of the various forms of punishment — all of them therefore actions which his judges in no way can condemn and repudiate.

The point is that criminals do not carry a *bad conscience*. This isn't because criminals are not afraid or even irreverent, it is because they feel they are being wronged by *justice*. The *bad conscience* tames the wild, instinctual human in us because the awareness of punishment stings our psyche; however, criminals feel wronged by what they believe is a system that is hypocritical and not punitive.

Justice

This then leads to an understanding of justice which is by no means easy to attain.

Firstly, it should be noted that Nietzsche does not believe that a truly just person is possible. He says that a perfectly just person “remains just even toward those who have harmed him, when the exalted, clear objectivity, as penetrating as it is mild, of the eye of justice and *judging* is not dimmed even under the assaults of personal injury, derision, and calumny”; however, he adds this person is “something it would be prudent not to expect or believe in too readily” (*OGM* Essay II, Section 11). For Nietzsche, even the slightest bit of personal “aggression, malice, or insinuation” is enough to bring impartiality to a judge. This may seem obvious, so one may ask what is the point?

Nietzsche introduces justice and judgment this way to compare those who attempt to judge within the vision of perfection (yet consistently fail nonetheless) with others who judge with outright *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* is held in the “hands of revenge” and is rooted in Nietzsche’s *slave morality*. *Ressentiment* is a glaringly outward and **reactive** feeling of frustration and hostility — usually toward groups with more control. Judges who exude *ressentiment* — most prominently anarchists and antisemites, Nietzsche examples — judge **with bad conscience**! Judges with *ressentiment* cannot ascertain the fearful awareness *they* feel toward those they target from the necessary ability of proper judgment.

When judges, or those who judge, are extrapolated to sub-groups of society who can attain control, the idea of justice leads to law:

The imperative declaration of what in general counts as permitted, as just, in its eaves, and what counts as forbidden, as unjust: once it has instituted the law, it treats violence and capricious acts on the part of individuals or entire groups as offenses against the law, as rebellion against the supreme power itself, and thus leads the feelings of its subjects away from the direct injury caused by such offences

(OGM, Essay II, Section 11).

And in this struggle for justice, it is necessarily the reactive whom the law targets. The law is “a means of putting an end to the senseless raging of *ressentiment* among the weaker powers² that stand under it (whether they be groups or individuals)” (OGM, Essay II, Section 11). Without this lack of control — or better said, “with control” — the festering of *ressentiment* in those who host it would no longer have the luxury (logically) of an **outward**-facing hostility to another group of people and would therefore be necessarily nonexistent. Any continued hostility would take a new form.

Response

I believe that Nietzsche’s *bad conscience* is not an indictment — along with slave morality or ascetic behaviors (to connect OGM Essay II with the first and third essays) — of followers or possibly “last men.” The *bad conscience* is important just as the camel and lion are both important steps along the journey to the child! In the early parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we

² Nietzsche’s use of “power” here is contextually the same as “control”

are shown that creation is most important — highlighted is the creation of new values and of new laws (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, Section 9). As *bad conscience* is likened to a **particular** disease (pregnancy; though I happen to view this biological process to be absent of inherent pathology and thus not a disease), I strongly share the interpretation of Walter Kaufmann that Nietzsche intentionally chose pregnancy so as to liken *bad conscience* with the coming of the child. In the spirit of his ideas, I find that if one submits to the value judgments, principles, and laws of his or her society without **creating** their own as well, he or she has not evolved to the great lengths Nietzsche had envisioned possible. Is this good or bad? My answer is that I don't think it really matters. I find that the importance of Nietzsche here is not **his desire** for a perfect human to blossom (Napoleons, Alexander the Greats, conquerors, and Caesars), rather, it is his recognition of *why* and *how* we interact the way we do and the revelation that our behaviors are *not* simple because we have been forced into interaction. I find unique Nietzsche's perspective that our nature (as humans in pre-history) is neither good nor bad —but especially incomparable with how we are now.

I believe no matter what claim may be laid upon the nature of humans, nobody may use it to defend any behavior in the name of Nietzsche! This is because such behavior, of the modern human, faces inherent issues when applied in a society. One cannot say it is “unnatural” for humans to engage in something when it was unnatural for humans to develop a mere *memory*. This is in a sense provocative of Nietzsche, but it was well supported throughout the second essay in my opinion.

On the whole topic of the creditor-debtor relationship, as an inception of morality, I am a supporter. I do think that it has merit and leads logically to the control structures we observe today. Anecdotally I would venture to say, we find that longevity in generational financial and status success is seen through need-based investment or direct credit extension to the less-resourced who will always owe — be it in gratitude or financial debt. Seldom does wealth and high status erode, rather it is continuously leveraged further.

I also wish to speak on certain misuse of Nietzsche in alt-right ideology, chiefly white nationalism. I find it extremely hard to steelman an endorsement of white nationalists from Nietzsche's writings in *OGM* Essay II. Primarily, I find the act of scapegoating parallel in nature (if not, identical) to *ressentiment*. This behavior will always be condemned by the masses, and it will always be out-controlled. And in the rare event that this belief gains prominence, it must pivot from an idea that projects outward and up, to one that must suppress all below it. This is unsustainable, this form of justice does not last. What I find horrifying, however, is that this vain pursuit and unsuccessful justice leads to widespread casualties. As we find, this ideology does not change society, it only damages it.

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