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## Nietzsche's Genealogy and Moral Confidence

### **Introduction**

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche aims to undermine confidence in traditional moral values. Essentially, his argument uses a historical account of the origin of moral concepts to indicate that they are the undesirable result of pure *ressentiment*. Potential tension between his meta-ethical views and his evaluations of slave morality may cast doubt on his success in accomplishing his aim, but I will ultimately resolve this tension to conclude that Nietzsche succeeds in undermining moral concepts.

### **What does confident mean?**

In considering Nietzsche's genealogical argument, the first issue of importance is the definition of confidence in the context of traditional Judeo-Christian moral values. One potential definition of confidence holds it to be an affirmation of the benefit in adopting these traditional moral values. If these values are beneficial or effective guides to action, then we might have confidence in them. This is a flawed definition because it misses the foundation of these values. The reason people often wholeheartedly express belief in Judeo-Christian moral concepts is that those concepts are believed to be objective. In addition to objectivity, those who espouse the traditional moral values that Nietzsche critiques believe moral properties to be externally grounded; they exist independently of one's belief in them. If confidence is based on the utility of the traditional Judeo-Christian moral system, then it is separated from the truth value of these morals. This fails to consider the way in which those values are thought to be objective and external. In the context of moral values, confidence should be an affirmation of the objective and

external nature of those values. If one believes a set of values to have factual truth, then one is confident in those values. Considering the aim of Nietzsche's arguments, this is the most relevant definition of confidence in the context of moral value.

### **Why does Nietzsche's account undermine confidence?**

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche writes in three distinct sections, but the first two are most important in addressing the historical origins of traditional moral concepts according to Nietzsche. The first section details the transition from master morality to slave morality, and the second section explains the origin of guilt and the moralization of bad conscience. Reconstruction of the arguments of these two sections is imperative for evaluating whether Nietzsche succeeds in his aim of undermining confidence in moral values.

Nietzsche's first treatise, titled "'Good and Evil,' 'Good and Bad,'" begins with the origin of the concept of good. Nietzsche claims that good descends from the conception of the powerful and noble person, and bad descends from the opposite, the common, vulgar man<sup>1</sup>. The bad is formed as a mere afterthought to provide some contrast to good, so there is no significant animosity contained in these concepts. This comprises the master morality, but beginning with Jewish religious thought, Nietzsche argues, comes the beginning of slave morality. Judeo-Christian moral values invert the good and bad of the master morality such that the powerful became evil<sup>2</sup>. In this way, the powerless can have the imaginary revenge their *ressentiment* requires by denying something to which they define themselves in opposition<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1998, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 19-20.

Nietzsche's second treatise, titled "Guilt, 'Bad Conscience,' and Related Matters," begins with the claim that the concept of guilt comes from the idea of contractual debt, and punishment comes from equating the victim's injury with the perpetrator's pain<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, Nietzsche posits suffering as a "seductive lure to life" in that it fulfills a fundamental human desire to make others feel pain as an exercise of personal power<sup>5</sup>. This is relevant to the historical formation of morality because of its relation to bad conscience. Nietzsche holds that bad conscience is a form of adapting to a society of relative peace where people could not make others suffer through punishment and thus needed to turn those passions inward upon themselves<sup>6</sup>. This internalization becomes religiously moralized as man erects the idyllic figure of God to be "tangibly certain of his absolute unworthiness" and to punish himself for failing to submit fully to God's will<sup>7</sup>. Thus, Judeo-Christian moral values arise from the inversion of master morality by the powerless, and the normative force that binds people to those values is the internalization of the human desire to inflict meaningful suffering.

The reason this account would undermine confidence in moral concepts is that Nietzsche's genealogy clearly details how the moral values of the slave, the Judeo-Christian values, are a product of pure *ressentiment*; they are not concepts refined over centuries of intense normative thought. Taking Nietzsche's account to be true, one cannot interpret one's belief in traditional moral values as a result of their external grounding in objective truth. In this way, Nietzsche's account would undermine confidence in moral concepts.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 63.

## **Objection**

Having reconstructed Nietzsche's genealogical account of morality and explained the reason it would undermine confidence in moral values, I will now present a potential objection to Nietzsche's arguments. Those who disagree with Nietzsche's claims may find tension in his view on value. Nietzsche holds that there is no objective basis for the truth value of moral claims. One can expand this to discredit objectivity in any statement of desirability because claiming that something is desirable or undesirable has a certain normative quality in that it implicitly prescribes action: desirable ends ought to be sought out, and undesirable ends ought to be avoided. Nietzsche does not believe that there is an objective basis for these kinds of evaluations, yet he repeatedly casts traditional Judeo-Christian values as undesirable. Within this argument, the adherents of slave morality might claim, there is a bit of tension.

If evaluative statements of desirability, in the same way as moral statements, have no objective basis, then they cannot be truly deemed as undesirable. If traditional moral values cannot be considered undesirable, then there is no reason that confidence in morality must be shaken. The main evaluative claim Nietzsche seems to deeply hold as objectively true is the undesirability of nihilism. Nihilism, for Nietzsche, is undesirable because it negates the will to live. Within this context, Nietzsche actually considers the traditional moral values of the slave morality to be somewhat desirable. Although the slave morality is life-negating in a certain way, as it does not aid humans in realizing their full potential and hinders their attempts to live their best lives, it also has a certain life-affirming quality when contrasted with nihilism. Judeo-Christian moral values detail a kind of inherent purpose that staves off the meaningless suffering so unbearable to humans. That purpose is what helped slave morality stave off nihilism for centuries. Objectors to Nietzsche's arguments would take this contrast with nihilism as an

indication that traditional moral values are truly desirable. Thus, people should continue to maintain confidence in those values. In response, a defender of Nietzsche might indicate that this desirability is short-term; God is dead, so the typical grounding of these values has long since been lost, and people gradually lose interest in this system. With this viewpoint, the victory of life-negating nihilism over the nauseating values of Judeo-Christian morality is just a matter of time. However, the objector would point out that this argument is not responsive to the presented objection. Simply because many lose faith in traditional moral values over time, that is not an indication that those values are undesirable. As a result, it is also not an indication that people should be any less confident in traditional moral concepts than they were before Nietzsche's genealogy. For an adherent to the slave morality, the desirability of Judeo-Christian moral values is sufficient to protect confidence in them.

### **Response**

Seeing an objection to Nietzsche's arguments, I will now present potential responses to the objection. First, the objection to Nietzsche takes desirability to have some sort of prescriptive or normative force attached to it which is analogous to a moral statement. The objector finds tension here with Nietzsche's belief that moral claims have no objective basis; however, this difficulty is resolved by conceptualizing desirability in terms of mere motivational force.

Nietzsche believes human beings have some sort of motivation for rejecting nihilism because it negates their very lives and makes all suffering unbearably meaningless. However, Nietzsche still has reason to believe that slave morality is not particularly desirable either since it is not truly life-affirming; it limits humans from fulfilling their potential. The master morality is more life-affirming, and thus humans have better motivation to adopt its values. Nietzsche is not

arguing that there are objective moral properties which classify certain value systems as morally better than others, and it is not incoherent for him to evaluate the desirability of a moral system.

This response alone casts doubt on the objection, but there is another issue with the objector's argument against Nietzsche. The objection presented in the previous section reduces confidence in moral value to an estimation of its desirability. Doing so fails to meet the definition of confidence established in the first section of this essay. Arguing that a set of values is merely useful is not a case of confidence in the context of moral value. In fact, if people simply follow those moral values for their utility, and if they might acknowledge that those values are not objectively grounded in some source external to human thought, then this seems to match Nietzsche's alternative of personal moral fictions that defend against nihilism. Thus, even taking this part of the objection to be true, Nietzsche still succeeds in his aim of undermining confidence in traditional moral concepts because of the definition of confidence in the context of Judeo-Christian moral values.

## **Conclusion**

Nietzsche's historical account indicates that these values are not externally grounded in objective truth. Those who disagree with Nietzsche might object that he has no grounds for deeming slave morality undesirable due to his meta-ethical stance; however, this objection is resolved by closely examining desirability and, additionally, misinterprets confidence in the context of moral value. Thus, Nietzsche succeeds in undermining confidence in traditional moral concepts.