How Deep Are the Roots of Nihilism?

Nietzsche on the Creative Power of Nature and Morality

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Nietzsche’s philosophy of the future is based on his critical understanding of the past, indeed on what Nietzsche takes to be the first fully truthful and therefore the first true understanding of the past. In a move typical of much of modern philosophy (Rousseau being perhaps the exemplary figure), he combines revolutionary proposals for the future with a theoretically revolutionary analysis not only of the present and its needs but of the whole of human history and the way it has shaped the present.

In Nietzsche’s case, of course, the specific crisis that demands his attention is nihilism, the loss of value and meaning, the enervation of humanity’s creative will. Nietzsche regards this crisis as the ultimate consequence not of particular social arrangements or institutions like private property, but rather of certain moral value judgments compounded with historical consciousness, specifically the awareness of the untold amount of suffering that has suffused human history. The question is how deep the roots of nihilism go: is the vitiating morality against which Nietzsche inveighs comprised only of very specific beliefs informing Western civilization (chiefly those of Plato and Christianity), or is there something about society as such, and the instinctual repression which it requires or enacts, that makes the human animal sick? Does
Nietzsche’s analysis of nihilism, in other words, call for the destruction of civil society and morality, or at least a return to a less developed and so a less repressive stage of human social evolution (cf. Rosen 1995, p. 60)? Commenters have often observed that Nietzsche’s censure of ‘morality’ does not apply to all forms or types of morality; my question here concerns the conditions that make a morality healthy or unhealthy. Are these conditions simply a matter of the degree of instinctual repression embodied in a particular morality, so that the content and spirit of a morality is ultimately merely a function of this fundamental fact?

I. Nietzsche and the Question of Origins

Perhaps the most straightforward way to investigate this question is to examine Nietzsche’s account of the founding of political societies in the Second Essay of On the Genealogy of Morals. What better way to understand the effects of morality as such than to look at the effects of the first morality, at how the most basic and original form of morality changed human beings? This proposal, however, faces an immediate objection drawn from Nietzsche’s own texts, namely his insistence that the question of origins is irrelevant to a proper understanding of a thing, and especially of morality. Nietzsche makes this general claim in a famous passage in the Genealogy:

[T]here is for all types of history no more important tenet than that which has been achieved with such effort, but which really should be achieved—namely that the cause of the emergence of a thing and its eventual utility,
its actual employment and integration (Einordnung) in a system of purposes, lie separated toto coelo; that something existing, having somehow come to be, is always again interpreted from new views by a power superior to it, newly monopolized, reformed and redirected to new uses; that all occurrences in the organic world are an overpowering, a becoming master, and that again all overpowering and becoming master are a new interpretation, an adaptation, where the previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ must necessarily be obscured or obliterated altogether (2.12).\(^1\)

The implications of this view for understanding political and moral development are clear enough, but Nietzsche makes them perfectly explicit elsewhere (e.g., GS 345 end). We should note, however, that in passages like section 345 of The Gay Science, Nietzsche is speaking about the value of morality, which is not quite the same as its ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ the two aspects of a thing that the passage from the Genealogy says change radically over time. For the purpose of this paper, however, I think we can treat the two (or three) together, and ask the very general question of whether understanding the origin of an object contributes anything to understanding its present meaning or value.

It may then seem that Nietzsche does or should have no interest in the origin of anything. It might, for instance, be an interesting piece of trivia to know that the Christmas tree is descended from a pagan ritual or practice, but it does nothing to illuminate the social meaning or function of Christmas trees in, say, the contemporary United States or Victorian England. One could argue that the Christian Christmas holiday, like the contemporary secular-commercial version of Christmas (from which it
cannot always be distinguished), serves the same purpose as the original pagan ritual, to
affirm fertility and rebirth in the depths of winter, and that the evergreen tree plays an
important part in this function. This argument, however, should be based on an analysis
of the significance of the Christmas holiday in a particular time and place, not on an
assertion that the original meaning and purpose continue to exert a mysterious influence
over the present instantiation of the holiday, somehow imparting that first meaning and
purpose to all subsequent versions regardless of their contexts or uses.

Brian Leiter answers this objection by arguing that the “point of origin of a
morality has a special evidential status as to the effects (or causal powers) of that
morality, for example, as to whether a morality obstructs or promotes human
flourishing…by understanding the origin, we understand the effects of adopting a
particular morality;” Leiter uses the sun as an example of an object that has had stable or
permanent causal powers over time but widely different meanings in different belief
systems (Leiter 2002, pp. 177-78). In this case a certain type of morality, the Christian or
altruistic type of morality that has finally spawned nihilism, would have a positive
meaning for a certain type of human being, one racked by ressentiment and trying to
promote a morality that honors itself and the behaviors and attitudes of which it is
capable. But that type of morality will always be destructive of human flourishing, for
there is an ahistorical type of human excellence that always requires a certain type of
morality to realize itself (cf. Leiter 2002, pp. 8-11).

This claim, however, ignores Nietzsche’s emphasis on the radical variability of
both the causes and consequences of particular moral beliefs, or on the radical variability
of the different human types drawn to the same system of moral valuation at different
points in history. So, for instance, Nietzsche gives extremely high praise to the one who first conceived of the Abrahamic or at least Judeo-Christian imperative to love man for the sake of God (literally: ‘in order to will God’ [BGE 60]), and likewise notes that there came a time when the aristocratic morality of ancient Athens was outlived and represented merely a mendacious hedonism, not the aristocratic splendor and greatness of soul it once had (BGE 212). Nietzsche is thus mindful and indeed insistent that the same morality can not only provoke different responses over time but also be espoused for different reasons and produce different results; for a time Christianity deepened and broadened the human soul, just as a time came when no amount of adherence to the moral code of old Athens was enough to ward off disintegration and decay. Indeed, Nietzsche’s emphasis on the non-rational psychological sources of morality suggests that morality is relatively lacking in causal power unless it is imposed; the adoption of a particular kind of morality already indicates something decisive about an individual (e.g., BGE 3-6, CW, Epilogue).²

Why then should one devote such attention to the question of the origin of political society, and more specifically to Nietzsche’s treatment of it? It is, after all, not even the case that Nietzsche’s claims about the disjunction between origin and later meaning necessarily imply knowledge of the origin: one could conclude, solely on the basis of the many fundamental changes in meaning and function that can be observed in history, that the original meaning and purpose of a thing cannot determine its later uses. This claim, however, is always open to the objection that without knowledge of an origin one cannot know whether a thing’s origin is indeed shaping or controlling its later interpretations and uses. A crude sketch of psychoanalysis provides an example: an
early traumatic memory is repressed but continues to inform our later experiences and
indeed to structure our minds and souls (and does so all the more powerfully for being
unrecognized or not consciously remembered). The point here is obviously not whether
psychoanalysis is true but whether we can conceive of a relation between origin and
present in which a forgotten or unknown origin continues to define present experience;
clearly we can.3

In the example Nietzsche uses in the Genealogy, however, namely the history of
punishment, it is clear that the procedure of punishment has had such radically different
purposes assigned to it that one can safely or reasonably assume that the original purpose
has been, as Nietzsche says in 2.12, obliterated altogether. This is even more true of the
meanings or interpretations attaching to punishment, which have undergone revolutions
so profound that we can barely comprehend their earliest forms. Nietzsche tells us, for
instance, that ‘punishment, as requital, evolved completely apart from any presupposition
concerning freedom or unfreedom of the will’ (2.4). The belief that ‘the criminal
deserves punishment because he could have acted differently,’ which now seems ‘so
obvious, so apparently natural, even unavoidable,’ was in fact completely absent or
unknown in the earliest stages of civilization, though punishment certainly was not. The
original meaning of punishment is then not the meaning it has now, even in a modified or
attenuated form; this means that when Nietzsche says that today it is impossible to say
why one punishes (2.13), he is saying that there are multiple meanings that are currently
‘alive’ and animating or informing punishment, not that there are primordial meanings
continuing to do so without anyone’s being aware of it (indeed, this latter view of
intellectual and moral history is precisely the one for which Nietzsche criticizes the
‘English psychologists’ in the First Essay [1.1-2; cf. 2.4]). Again Christmas furnishes a good example—today the holiday has commercial, religious and larger social meanings, but this is because all of these meanings, and all of the systems of purposes from which they arise, are currently active and at work in the larger social field of interpretations, not because one of these meanings is older and therefore ‘deeper’ than the others, and thus continuing to determine the meaning of Christmas without being consciously or explicitly avowed.

Though it is not entirely clear that Nietzsche’s comments about punishment apply equally to moral and social life, Nietzsche’s insistence on the importance of the historical sense for studying the history of morality suggests that they do, that both the form of social and political structures and their moral interpretation or meaning have been subject to repeated profound revolutions, so that the original meaning and purpose of political organization have no influence on its present significance, function and value.

Yet Nietzsche does devote considerable time and effort to furnishing an account of the origins of political society. Why? In the first place because even if the origin of a thing does not determine that thing’s later uses, meanings and values, it can still effectively illustrate the basic character of life. The picture Nietzsche presents of the world and of human history, especially in 2.12, explains and is exemplified in the account of the origins of human society he provides. The origins of something in the human world, and especially of something as all-encompassing and defining as society and morality, can teach us a great deal about the basic conditions of existence and about the character of things like the will to power and nature. Nature is illuminated especially clearly by such an investigation, both the form of pre-political human nature and the
qualities and work of nature itself in spurring or resisting the creation of political life.

Nietzsche, as we will see below, focuses not only on the role of nature in the moment of political founding or in the very beginning of political societies, but also on the related questions of how civilized morality has effected human nature and whether or to what extent morality is actuated or molded by nature.

At the same time, of course, Nietzsche is concerned to explain such an enormous and essential event in human history in his own terms, to show that his philosophy can offer a convincing and indeed illuminating account of these topics; in other words, Nietzsche’s treatment of this question is part of his attempt to ‘translate the human being back into nature’ (BGE 230). I therefore agree with those who emphasize that part of Nietzsche’s concern in the *Genealogy* is to give a naturalistic explanation of the rise of various moral experiences and practices formerly thought to be of supernatural origin; this, indeed, is what Nietzsche stresses in his discussion of the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo*.  

Finally, although Nietzsche warns against assuming that the present purpose of a thing is the cause of its origin, this does not mean that no original feature of politics and morality has perdured until today. The initial purpose of civilized morality was simply to mold a formless and unruly populace into an ordered whole or living structure (2.17). This is not the essential or necessary purpose of morality as such, and most of the specific injunctions (and penalties), and thus the content as well as the aim and meaning of morality, have changed completely since its inception. But the repression of the natural instincts of aggression and cruelty, the psychological and moral phenomenon that Nietzsche calls ‘the bad conscience’ for much of the Second Essay, has remained the
basic condition or matrix for the creation of morality. Nietzsche’s account of the origin of political society, and so of the origin of the bad conscience, is therefore still germane and indeed indispensable to a consideration of contemporary morality because it elucidates something fundamental about the basic character of all civilized morality. It concerns the condition of living in society as such, not simply the original meaning of political society. It therefore also illuminates the future of morality: is civilized morality something that must be destroyed or at least severely pared down, or something that should be refashioned and redirected to new ends?

II. Nietzsche’s Account of the Origin of Political Life

In the sixteenth section of the Second Essay Nietzsche gives a powerful statement of his hypothesis concerning the origin of the bad conscience—that it is a ‘sickness’ that consists of humanity’s most basic animal instincts, aggression and the desire for change and destruction, being turned back inward upon their possessor. Human beings, in Nietzsche’s account, were forced to do this by the imposition of social and political life, which made the violent, outward discharge of those drives impossible. Nietzsche’s reconstruction of this process clarifies his estimation of the status and value of civilized morality, understood precisely as the repression and redirection of humanity’s animal instincts. There are three major aspects of this discussion: the nature or activity of nature as Nietzsche describes it, the differences he indicates exist between the ancient nobles and the artist-lawgivers who found states, and finally the decisive question of
whether all civilized morality makes human beings sick by poisoning them with ressentiment.

A. The Form-Creating Activity of Nature

In the seventeenth section Nietzsche explains who, according to his hypothesis, must have founded the first ‘state:’ ‘some pack of blond beasts of prey (Raubthiere), a conqueror and master race, which, organized for war and with the power (Kraft) to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible paws upon a population perhaps enormously superior in numbers but still shapeless, still prowling’ (2.17). If the pre-political Volk was a mass of ‘half-animals’ (2.16), Nietzsche figures the founders of the first state as still wholly animal (cf. BGE 257: those who founded the first hierarchical or aristocratic societies were ‘more whole human beings [which at every level also means “more whole beasts”]’). On the one hand, this language highlights the greater animality and thus naturalness of these lawgiving blond beasts (and indeed Nietzsche is about to describe the lawgiver or political founder as ‘by nature “master”’); on the other, it highlights Nietzsche’s paradoxical conception of nature, for to be more natural and more animal means, in the case of a human being, to create and found a political society, and thus to sever a great mass of human beings from their natural animal instincts and existence. In other words, even with Nietzsche’s emphasis on the terribleness and violence of the lawgivers and his use of vivid animal imagery to describe them, these blond beasts are above all concerned with organization (organized and with the power to organize), as becomes even more clear shortly. Unlike the nobles of the First Essay, this master race
does not delight or take pleasure in simple destruction (cf. 1.11); it seeks to form and organize other human beings.

Nietzsche continues, ‘One who can command, who is by nature “master” (wer von Natur “Herr” ist), who steps forth violent in work and gesture—what has he to do with contracts!’ Nietzsche thus shows that he has not clumsily mistaken social contract theories for actual historical suppositions. Nietzsche’s argument is not merely that historically the state did not begin with a contract; his argument is rather that nature does not warrant or underwrite any conception of equal rights or a sovereign legal order in which all individuals are treated as equal and inviolable (cf. the end of 2.11). On the contrary, nature makes some masters; it makes them capable of violently commanding and molding others.8

But what does it mean to be ‘by nature “master”’? What does nature create or achieve in and through such a person? In the first place, it creates forms and structures, a new, unified, living whole. The one who is by nature ‘master’ does not simply lord it over others or use them to satisfy his desires for pleasure or even recognition or honor. He creates. Thus nature is creative, but this creation must be violent and terrible, for there is neither an original natural form to reproduce nor a harmonious progress towards a naturally ordained end. The prepolitical populace is formless; indeed its nature seems to be only a formless chaos. Yet it is nature itself that demands that this mass of half-animals be formed into something. The pre-political populace must therefore be given a definite form by acts of violence, like a stone being smashed and cut into a sculpture. At the same time, violence here is formative and creative, not simply destructive, as it had appeared in the portrait of the nobles in 1.11; hence, to repeat, the “blond beasts”
described here are not simply destructive (barbarian invasions, etc.); they rather roam and raid in order to impose a form on the conquered populace. The motivation of the artist-lawgivers of this passage is thus somehow distinct from the joy in destruction attributed both to the aristocratic blond beasts at 1.11 and to pre-political humanity at 2.16. Yet Nietzsche employs the word ‘nature’ only to describe the violent artist-lawgiver, not the formless prepolitical populace, just as he describes those who found aristocracies in Beyond Good and Evil as ‘human beings with a still natural nature (Menschen mit einer noch natürlichen Natur)’ (BGE 257); it appears that the violent but form-giving artist is what is natural, not the violent but formless primeval mass of people (cf. the crucial discussion in BGE 188). Put differently, although nature does not have unitary or harmonious purposes, and is thus both destructive and creative, Nietzsche seems to identify its creative impetus or activity as more essential than its purely destructive and chaotic activity.

B. The Nobles and the Artist-Lawgivers

The artist-lawgivers’ creation exemplifies both the creativity of nature and the process of interpretation and the giving of meaning that Nietzsche delineates in 2.12, as he makes clear in his description of their deed and its significance.

Their work is an instinctive creation and imposition of forms, they are the most involuntary, unconscious artists that there are—soon something new stands there, where they appear, a ruling-structure that lives (ein
Herrschafts-Gebilde, das lebt), in which parts and functions are delimited and coordinated, in which nothing at all finds a place which is not first assigned a ‘meaning’ in regard to the whole. They do not know what guilt, what responsibility, what consideration is, these born organizers; at work in them is that terrible artist-egoism…It is not in them that the ‘bad conscience’ has grown, that is understood at once—but it would not have grown without them (2.17).

This passage may seem familiar enough at first. The artist-lawgivers, like the nobles of the First Essay, are powerful, violent and unrepressed, indeed governed by their unconscious and involuntary instincts (cf. 1.11). One might think that they are the same people or at least the same human type at different points in time. As we have just seen, however, the nobles retain the pre-political populace’s joy in destruction; indeed their ability to revert to ‘the wild’ and release the pressure caused by socialization prevents the bad conscience from affecting them nearly as profoundly as it does their social inferiors. Although this means the nobles suffer less than those of lower social rank, it also means that they lack the tension and sense of dissatisfaction necessary to envision new ideals and forms of life. In short, the nobles do not create. Nietzsche says that the nobles seek release from ‘the tension (Spannung) engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society’ (1.11); the problem with the nobles seems to be that they find this release, that they are able to relieve their tension before it becomes creative. The word Spannung usually carries positive connotations for Nietzsche; he associates it with vision, creativity, and going beyond oneself. For the ancient nobles, on
the other hand, tension is an unpleasant symptom of living in society, but one which they are able to assuage by returning to the wilderness. By slackening their tension through uninhibited violence, the nobles close off any possibility of overcoming themselves; they remain what they are, politically powerful and self-affirming but one-dimensional and stagnant.

The artist-lawgivers therefore do not appear to be the same as the self-satisfied but sporadically violent nobles of the First Essay, who mainly occupy themselves with slapping themselves and each other on the back, occasionally going out to kill and torture when the tension engendered by the demand for reciprocal admiration grows too great.\(^9\)

The nobles, in short, are able to take a self-affirming attitude towards themselves and thus towards life or the world, which fills them with gratitude and love for existence. These are obviously good things, but the nobles take their place within a social order already established by others—indeed their affirmative stance towards themselves and life is entirely dependent upon their place in that order—and tend to be static and conservative elements within the living structure they inhabit.\(^10\) Their emotional or affective experience is one of self-affirmation, but the organized whole in which they live as well as the content of their beliefs and their form of life are determined by the artist-lawgivers who founded the community.

All of this should establish that a simple reversion to the noble or aristocratic way of life sketched in the First Essay is not Nietzsche’s goal, in which case Nietzsche would seem clearly not to be calling for a straightforward return to a less civilized and thus less repressed stage of human history, and his view of society and its concomitant suppression of instinct would not be purely negative. To this, however, one can object that Nietzsche
presents the artist-lawgivers as both wholly uninhibited and perhaps the pinnacle of human creativity. They are free of the bad conscience and create as a matter of pure instinctual discharge; thus whatever critical distance Nietzsche might maintain from the ancient nobles, he ultimately regards society and its attendant moralized repression of instinct in unfavorable terms. Indeed, one could still maintain that Nietzsche desires a return to a more or less barbaric stage of human evolution, not to recapture ancient forms of nobility but in order to make the emergence of new artist-lawgivers possible.

C. **Ressentiment** and the Bad Conscience

Henry Staten makes perhaps the strongest case that Nietzsche is indeed committed to just such a negative view of society and morality, as evidenced especially by his insistence that the founders of states are untouched by civilized morality (Staten 1990, pp. 51 ff.). For Staten, however, this indicates a self-contradiction in Nietzsche’s thought more than anything else: he argues that Nietzsche’s account of the bad conscience shows not only that all of humanity living in society (and therefore necessarily the artist-lawgivers) are subject to the repression of instinct Nietzsche calls the bad conscience, but that this repression of instinct also necessarily produces universal ressentiment. There are then two distinct criticisms of Nietzsche on this point. The first one is somewhat narrower and is made by both Staten and Aaron Ridley, both of whom argue that Nietzsche is mistaken to claim that the founders of states caused the bad conscience in others without being subject to it themselves (Staten 1990, pp. 51 ff., Ridley 1998, pp. 17 ff.). Since Nietzsche’s argument is that all human beings living in
any form of society are subject to the bad conscience, the exemption he appears to grant
the political founders in 2.17 is incoherent on his own terms.

It is certainly hard to understand how a group of people ‘organized for war and
with the power to organize’ could be so highly socialized and regimented without having
acquired the bad conscience. It may be possible to make sense of Nietzsche’s statements
if we take him to be suggesting that the law code being imposed on one people (or a
series of peoples) is experienced by the subjected population as an oppressive restriction,
but by the conquerors as a vehicle for their will to power. When, for instance, ‘Umar ibn
al-Khattāb converted to Islam he had to comply with a series of religious prohibitions and
injunctions, and thus to check some of his desires or the particular forms taken by some
of his instincts, but the religious and political structure of Islam obviously provided him
with an instrument through which to express and satisfy his most fundamental instinct,
his will to power, and to do so on a scale of far greater power and magnitude than mere
personal morality. And this did not mean only military conquest and rule, but forming
the conquered peoples and civilizations into a new living structure, that provided by
Muhammad and his revelation. Thus ‘Umar’s mild suppression of certain instincts or
desires and, more significantly, his spiritual and political subordination to Muhammad
were secondary to the power and creative achievement this subordination provided him.

Even more fundamentally, however, the freedom from the bad conscience is
perhaps best understood not as a lack of all constraint or the free expression or discharge
of every instinct, but as the concentration and molding, and thus necessarily the partial
compulsion and constriction, of the instincts of freedom or the will to power into a
specific creative activity (on the relation between compulsion and creativity see BGE
188; EH, z 3). This would account for the more difficult case of Muhammad, who would have had to restrict and channel his creative energies even more severely than his followers, and thus again to focus and intensify some instinctual impulses while subduing and starving others. While Muhammad was the creator of the law and thus did not have to submit himself to the rule of another, his actions and creations would have been at least partially constrained by the forms he found already in existence, beginning with the Arabic language which he used to such effect, and this would have required a great deal of repression, rechanneling and reordering of various biological drives. Obviously, the Islamic conquest occurred at a much later and more developed stage of civilization, and effected a much less complete transformation, than the process described in 2.17, but I believe we can extrapolate from the former to the latter, in both the case of the founder and his followers, to provide at least a partial answer to this objection.

The second, more penetrating criticism of Nietzsche’s presentation of the artist-lawgivers is made only by Staten, who argues that in Nietzsche’s own telling, all of humanity, at least to the extent that it lives in society and so suffers repression of instinct, is animated by ressentiment, not merely the weak and vengeful slaves (cf. 1.10 ff.). At stake is not only the logical consistency of Nietzsche’s discussion in these passages but the guiding theme of this essay, the character and status of society in Nietzsche’s thought. If ressentiment necessarily attends or flows from repression of instinct, then what Nietzsche describes in the Second Essay as the bad conscience is, in its essence, another manifestation of ressentiment. In other words, Staten’s point is not simply that all socialized human beings experience occasional ressentiment, as Nietzsche admits that even the nobles do, but that all civilized morality is largely induced and governed by
ressentiment, in the same way that Nietzsche says slave morality is (1.10). This would mean that ressentiment is one of the fundamental constituents of the mental and affective life of every human being living in society, and thus that freedom from ressentiment would require freedom from society and the morality on which it relies.

This argument is very attractive; it is certainly tempting to read the Genealogy as a whole as a sustained investigation of ressentiment, one which identifies ressentiment at ever deeper levels of human consciousness and morality. The book would then move from the relatively superficial case of ressentiment directed at one’s political superiors and producing a particular form of morality, to the more profound case of ressentiment directed towards oneself and one’s animal instincts and permeating all of civilized life and morality, and finally show how ressentiment has been directed against the very conditions of existence itself, and has suffused and defined ascetic religion and even the scientific will to truth. This reading is obviously intellectually satisfying, and helps to tie the three essays together. But Nietzsche explicitly and emphatically insists that this is not his argument, that the bad conscience represents an active force, indeed the same active force at work in the founders of states, not the reactive force of ressentiment.

One should take care against thinking poorly of this whole phenomenon merely because it is ugly and painful from the beginning. Fundamentally it is after all the same active force (aktiv Kraft) that is at work on a grander scale in those artists of violence and organizers and that builds states, which here, internally, on a smaller and pettier scale, directed backwards, in the ‘labyrinth of the breast,’ to speak with Goethe, creates
for itself the bad conscience and builds negative ideals—it is precisely that instinct for freedom (in my language: the will to power): only the material on which the form-giving and violating nature (Natur)\textsuperscript{13} of this force vents itself is here precisely the human being himself, his whole animal ancient self—and not, as in that greater and more obvious phenomenon, the other human being, other human beings (2.18).

Nietzsche goes on to lavish the bad conscience with some of the highest praise found anywhere in the Genealogy: ‘this entire active “bad conscience” has ultimately—one could guess it already—as the actual womb of ideal and imaginative events also brought to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation and perhaps even for the first time beauty itself (die Schönheit).’

Thus Nietzsche makes it clear that, no matter how appealing the reading sketched above may be, this is not his position; the bad conscience is not an instance or effect of ressentiment, and the Second Essay is not a further exploration of ressentiment. The bad conscience, or at least the phenomenon Nietzsche describes with that name in 2.16-18, is the expression or result of an active, creative, form-giving force.

One may well object, however (as Staten does), that of course Nietzsche remembers to use the proper terminology, but the point is that Nietzsche’s claim that the process depicted here is free of ressentiment simply makes no sense; how can the repression of instinct, specifically of the instinctual urge for power, poison with ressentiment in one case but not in the other? What are the differences between the two situations that make the distinction meaningful or convincing? In the first place
Nietzsche argues that the transition from the pre-political to the political state was ‘a break, a leap, a compulsion, an ineluctable disaster, against which there is no struggle and not even any ressentiment’ (2.17). The law, the ‘fearful tyranny’ of the ‘crushing and remorseless machinery’ of the earliest state, is something too enormous, too total and specifically too brutal and terrifying for one to feel ressentiment towards it. The situation was therefore not that the desire for revenge was thwarted and needed to be suppressed and then satisfied covertly or mendaciously, but rather that there simply was no desire for revenge, only a kind of stupefied terror and acceptance of the dictates of the law and rulers.¹⁴

It is worth pausing here to note that in his explanation of why the imposition of a political form does not provoke ressentiment, Nietzsche emphasizes the horrific violence of the first state and the abject fear that violence aroused, rather than the finality or the lack of intention inherent in the catastrophe he describes. The founding of political society is a disaster or a piece of fate, as is ‘time and its “it was,”’ but the latter is still able to inspire ressentiment or, as Zarathustra calls it, ‘the spirit of revenge’ (Z 2.20). Social constraint and repression do not trigger ressentiment, according to Nietzsche, not because human beings are too rational to resent such a gargantuan, overwhelming, impersonal and irresistible process, but rather purely because of the logic of the affects, purely because ressentiment cannot coexist with or spring from such intense and absolute fear. Likewise, Zarathustra teaches not resignation or reconciliation to the inexorable necessity of time’s passage, but rather redemption through creative willing and affirmation.
Yet there is another, probably deeper and more important reason why the bad conscience is not colored or driven by ressentiment in Nietzsche’s view. Very simply, ressentiment is defined by three features, a feeling of impotence, a consequent desire for revenge, and the satisfaction of that desire through fantasies of revenge and a self-deceiving moralism. None of these things marks or informs the bad conscience. Considered purely in its own terms and not with reference to its origins, the bad conscience is an experience of power, not weakness, and thus embodies not a need for vengeance but a successful attempt to gratify the animal instincts of aggression that have been repressed. Since these instincts do indeed find something to work over and mold, namely ‘the human being himself, his whole animal ancient self,’ the individual is saved from a stymied and hence rancorous lust for dominance and revenge. Finally, this experience of power means that the instincts constituting the bad conscience, unlike ressentiment, need not content themselves with a purely imaginary revenge, which is to say with a purely imaginary feeling of power. Most fundamentally, then, the bad conscience is not ressentiment because it is an actual form of mastery and power, while ressentiment is not, and is indeed born of an experience of impotence.

Thus what is most significant about the slave revolt in morals, or the rise of a morality of ressentiment, is not that the slaves’ will to power needed to find a secret way to satisfy itself; this necessity is at the root of both the bad conscience and slave morality. The crucial point is rather that the will to power of the slaves was poisoned by ressentiment, which includes both the desire for vengeance and the awareness that one is too weak to achieve it. This also then means that the cardinal failing of the slaves (as opposed to the priests) is not simply their lack of political power and so of an external
outlet for their aggression, but their weakness with regard to themselves, their inability to turn those instincts inward and refashion or reshape themselves. Their inversion of noble morality, as Nietzsche emphasizes especially, amounts to nothing more than self-congratulatory prudence masquerading as virtue (1.13), not to a new moral code or spiritual dispensation that would serve the goal of furthering humanity. Hence the bad conscience makes humanity pregnant with a future, while slave morality simply makes it sick and false.

Another look at the actual mechanics of the bad conscience and its development will help elucidate this point. For the sake of clarity, it is important to begin by noting that Nietzsche specifically identifies “the same active force…namely, the instinct for freedom (in my language: the will to power)” as the power driving and shaping the bad conscience; he is, in other words, not simply describing violent impulses, whether purely mindless or possessing a degree of calculation or control. The instinct for freedom or the will to power manifests itself in all the violent instincts that must be suppressed in society, but it is not exhausted by or identical with them. This is significant because the instinct for freedom is able to create a bad conscience and negative ideals, while it is not clear that simple violent impulses could do anything of the sort. If one simply had violent impulses, one could at best suppress them for prudential reasons, like a kind of Pavlovian response. But there is something else present in or informing those impulses that turns them to self-creation and self-refashioning, or that makes one’s self-torture creative rather than aimlessly sadistic. This is also significant because it means that blocking the immediate and outward discharge of one’s violent urges does not necessarily mean repressing or suffocating the more fundamental instinct for freedom. Because
one’s violent impulses are in fact tied to or animated by the instinct for freedom, when those impulses are checked that instinct is not thwarted or denied expression; it simply redirects the violent drives inward and begins reworking the ‘ancient animal self’ from which it emanates. In fine, then, the active force Nietzsche is describing is form-giving and artistic, not merely violent (in fact, it seems opposed to the simple destructive violence of pre-political humanity, since it works to curb it), and the repression of one’s purely violent, aggressive impulses does not poison them with ressentiment, for it prevents their outward discharge but not their ability to form and create.

But if, as Nietzsche claims in 2.18, this fundamental urge for freedom or power ‘creates a bad conscience for itself and builds negative ideals,’ how can this still be considered a product of an active, affirmative impulse? How can negative ideals not be inherently reactive or evidence of ressentiment? The key point is that the creation of negative ideals serves the purpose of creation and growth, and proceeds from an active impulsion toward this expansion and reworking of oneself, not from a resentful reaction to inhibition. The negative ideals constructed by the bad conscience, in other words, are not primary but secondary and instrumental to the creative powers actuating this first stage of human moral development. Thus, to repeat, legal and social constraint have forced the will to power to change its direction and objects, but the force shaping and driving the bad conscience does not spring from a vengeful reaction to this constraint. The ressentiment of the slaves, by contrast, the force or energy behind their creation of values and ideals, derives from a negative, resentful reaction to another, and in particular to one more powerful than oneself. The whole of slave morality is therefore an attempt to gain some kind of compensation or solace for one’s impotence and inferiority by
negating the cause of one’s subordination, chiefly through self-serving lies about one’s moral superiority and fantasies of violent otherworldly revenge; it is an attempt to convince oneself that one does not really want to satisfy one’s most basic need or desire, rather than, as in the case of the bad conscience, the actual satisfaction of that need and desire, in however involuted and painful a form.¹⁵

For these two reasons, then, the bad conscience is not simply another, deeper experience or product of ressentiment. In the first place, the cause of the bad conscience, the external compulsion forcing one to turn one’s instincts inward, is too savage and too terrifying to permit of any kind of reaction even approaching ressentiment. Secondly and probably more importantly, once those instincts turn inward, they find something on which to vent themselves, and are thus able to experience themselves as powerful, as discharging themselves on something and refashioning it into something new. This experience of power prevents the impotent rage and venom that create ressentiment. Hence even after the initial terror of the founding of political life there is no necessary reason why the bad conscience, or the internalization of the instincts of aggression that Nietzsche describes with that name, must generate or fuse with ressentiment.

This discussion, however, has all taken place at a rather abstract level. Nietzsche’s broader point that the ‘bad conscience’ expresses the very instincts it seems to negate is bold and powerful; but what would it actually mean, in concrete terms, for the instincts of aggression and violence to turn against themselves or against their possessor?¹⁶ The sketch below is necessarily speculative, since Nietzsche does not provide a detailed explanation on this point, but it is, I think, a faithful extension of Nietzsche’s thought on this point as it is presented in the Genealogy.
Imagine that I am one of those human beings who have just been violently enclosed in the enforced peace of a new political society (or rather, that several years or perhaps an entire generation or two has passed since that first, terrible episode). I am walking down the street when suddenly I see some toothless, stoop-shouldered, sunken-chested old geezer, easily twenty-five years old if he’s a day, gumming a glob of rancid meat in imbecile contentment. I have the strong urge to rush up to him, smash his head against the ground, and eat his food myself (or perhaps simply to kill him). But I have some vague but powerful inkling that this will not end well for me. So I restrain myself, but it is not possible simply to dissolve or expunge the furious, primordial rush of this instinctual demand for violent attack. It can only turn back on itself; I can only restrain myself by turning my aggression back on itself, somehow splitting off some sense of that instinct or affect of aggression and turning it back against its original manifestation. It seems to me that this would happen immediately, that only by turning this instinct against itself could I control it at all; in other words, only by an act of psychic violence which would satisfy this instinct even as it checked it, or which would split the instinct in two, so to speak, and satisfy one part by checking the other, could I gain any control over that first, particular instance of the aggressive instinct (my desire to kill the geezer and take his food). Note that fear plays a crucial role here: it is only an intense fear born of witnessing the horrifying punishments of the earliest society that can restrain my innate ferocity (2.3), and it is this fear that must be regarded as the psychological agent or force splitting the instinct of aggression in two, even using one part of it for its own purposes. The earliest mental and moral self, in other words, is constituted largely by fear.
At this point there is already some division created within myself, and it seems to me likely that, in Nietzsche’s view, the experience of the violent repression of instinct, the extremely crude and half-conscious affect that has been separated off from the original instinct of aggression, constitutes a new mind or sense of self, and thus instantly becomes a new locus of power, meaning, and value, the one that will become augmented or hypertrophied in and by the development of the bad conscience; in this way, it quickly assumes sovereignty and becomes at least a competitor with fear, if not a more powerful force in the individual’s psyche. After this initial operation has been successfully performed a few times, and I start to check my aggression more successfully, it begins to ache and long for expression, for satisfaction, for a sense of play, mastery, venting, self-enjoyment. The momentary and largely prudentially motivated discharge of the drive against itself is insufficient. Thus it turns on itself in a much deeper and more serious way; it begins to attack itself morally and psychologically, and indeed to attack all of my basic animal instincts (though this may be more likely to happen over several generations or even centuries rather than in a single lifetime). It does so through this new sense of self, the conscience, that has been created by repression. Thus the ‘bad conscience,’ the feeling of guilt at all of my desires and instincts as such, begins to form and grow, and this new part of myself swells in power without recognizing itself for what it is, an expression of the very instinct of aggression that it is supposedly trying to control or extinguish.

Concomitant with this process of moral formation is the development of human consciousness; while originally the conscious mind had no awareness of the instincts, which simply asserted and discharged themselves without any need for reflection or even
basic conscious awareness, with the emergence of the bad conscience the conscious mind
begins to expand as it is forced to become cognizant of and to exercise conscious control
over a few very basic and coarse but very powerful and frequently recurring instincts.
Thus one begins to arrive at conscious awareness of one’s violent or aggressive instincts,
and also of the need to control them; this awareness necessitates or is perhaps identical
with a conscious effort to block or suppress these instincts, an effort which sets in motion
an attendant or auxiliary thought process, one which obviously includes a kind of moral
self-examination and self-criticism. In time this new mind or self, separated and
alienated from the basic set of biological instincts at work in an individual,17 develops the
capacity not only for moral judgment and inhibition but also for introspection and self-
knowledge. From here one not only starts to make value judgments about the different
instincts or drives; one also begins to develop the ability to think, reckon, infer, in short
to think about and plan for the future—and finally to reason, to think in a more general or
‘theoretical’ way, since even philosophic thinking is merely the relation of one drive to
another (BGE 36; cf. 6). Thus the first step not only toward any moral life for human
beings but also toward any intellectual life is the inhibition of instinct, which forces one
to become conscious of the instinct or drive and then to judge it—initially on purely
prudential grounds (to avoid punishment), but soon enough in a manner charged with
moral intensity and self-inflicted cruelty—and to think in an intellectual sense, however
crude that sense may have been originally (am I more hungry or thirsty? which is
stronger, my desire to kill this person or my fear of being tortured to death as a result?—
though even such questions as these would have first been asked and answered with only
a simple pre-verbal or pre-linguistic relation and comparison, i.e., struggle and rank-ordering, of the drives).

We can see, then, what an important, indeed what an essential and constitutive part the bad conscience plays in the development of humanity. Since the instincts being repressed and redirected are primarily desires for attack, change and destruction, it is not surprising that the condition or process Nietzsche names ‘the bad conscience’ is ever changing, ever driving forward, ever needing to ‘reshape,’ i.e., to obliterate, so much of what presently exists, and particularly so much of its own present form—it is, in short, tremendously pregnant and fruitful. In Nietzsche’s account, however, the primal urge for destruction and change which drives the bad conscience does not appear to be what is natural; it is rather giving this primal urge a particular form, and so necessarily constraining and even mutilating it, that is natural, both in the case of individuals and of founders of states (see again not only Nietzsche’s identification of the founders of states as natural but especially his discussion in BGE 188). We now stand at a time when this self-overcoming energy seems in danger of withering away, but that is the result of particular value judgments that have composed Western philosophy and spirituality, not of an intrinsic tendency of civilized morality to sap human fecundity and vitality. Thus Nietzsche avers that the bad conscience requires divine spectators for the drama it enacts (2.16); this statement echoes Nietzsche’s comments about religious belief at 2.7 in attributing the origin of gods, or of a certain type of human belief in the divine, not to moralistic spite or defeat but to a need for witnesses to human suffering. In this case, the spectacle is the constant struggle of humanity to overcome itself, a struggle essentially unbound by any final set of moral restraints and so capable of endless variation and
fascination for its spectators. In Nietzsche’s words, the spectacle of an animal soul turned against itself ‘was something so new, deep, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory and full of future (Zukunftsvolles) that the aspect of the earth was essentially altered. In fact, divine witnesses were needed to appreciate the spectacle…[The human being now] gives rise to an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something is announcing itself, something preparing, as if the human being is no end (Ziel), but only a path, an episode, a bridge, a great promise…’
Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical citations refer to the essay and section number of the *Genealogy* (so here to section twelve of the Second Essay). I have used the Kaufmann and Hollingdale translation, but have frequently modified it or replaced it with my own.

For further criticism of an ahistorical understanding of the will to power and its human manifestations, see Staten 2005. States ascribes to Nietzsche a more subtle position than does Leiter, but even so reveals important problems with the attempt to understand creativity as an inner impulse of a will to power that is purely active or creative, or that acts on and reworks physical and historical contingencies without being affected by them in any significant way.

Nietzsche himself seems to embrace such a notion at times, as for instance in his discussion of the forgotten and obscured ‘diverse origins’ of the ‘German soul’ (BGE 244), and especially in his insistence on the importance of heredity in determining the spiritual as well as the physical characteristics of an individual (BGE 261, 264, GS 348-349).

For this general claim about the naturalist purpose of genealogy, see Clark 1998, pp. xxi-xxiii and Leiter 2002, pp. 172-173; for a specific account of how the Second Essay in particular performs this function, see Conway 2007, pp. 76-85, and Janaway 2007, pp. 124-142.

Here I am only trying to reconcile Nietzsche’s concern with the origin of political society with his insistence that origins do not determine later meaning; I am not, in other words, giving anything like a comprehensive account of the significance of Nietzsche’s
practice of genealogy (I mention the naturalist facet of it only because nature plays a central role in Nietzsche’s account, as we will see below). For more on the purpose and import of genealogy in Nietzsche’s thought see Foucault 1984, Geuss 1999, Guay 2005 and Owen 2007 (a necessarily very short and incomplete list).

6 Several very good recent studies of the Genealogy focus their readings of the Second Essay almost exclusively on the formal characteristics of the kind of morality Nietzsche is discussing, the evocative figure of the sovereign individual, and the meaning of guilt and its relation to the bad conscience (Conway 2007, Janaway 2007, Owen 2007; also May 1999). My concern here is with morality qua instinctual repression of instinct and the place of nature in morality so understood. I therefore do not engage at length with these studies, though I certainly acknowledge their value for understanding the questions raised by the Second Essay and by the Genealogy as a whole.

7 Statements like this certainly raise the question of the political or cultural effects Nietzsche intended for this type of rhetoric to have. This question has been raised most cogently by Stanley Rosen (e.g., Rosen 1989, Rosen 1995 passim) and Geoff Waite (Waite 1996, especially, e.g., pp. 86 ff., 166 ff., and Chapter Three), but one should also note Henry Staten’s somewhat different treatment of this problem (Staten 1990 and 2005). For the limited purposes of this essay I try to set aside the question of Nietzsche’s rhetoric as much as possible, to see if Nietzsche’s account of the relation between moralized repression of instinct and nihilism can be understood in purely thematic or theoretical terms. Obviously, however, this yields only a partial or provisional interpretation of Nietzsche’s text.
As Keith Ansell-Pearson puts it, Nietzsche ‘is very much concerned with combating what he takes to be a “reactive” view on this question: the view that the origins of social order lie in the passions and needs of weak and insecure individuals’ (Ansell-Pearson 1994, p. 138).

At least this is how Nietzsche presents them in the First Essay of the Genealogy. Elsewhere Nietzsche presents the noble classes of societies as somewhat more spiritually complex and sophisticated, as for instance when he says that the troubadour ideal of love as passion is of noble origin (BGE 260), a suggestion somewhat at odds with the portrait of vacant self-congratulation which Nietzsche paints in the First Essay.

This point can also be made by referring to the definition of conscience Aaron Ridley uses in his book on the Genealogy: ‘To have a conscience, then, good or bad, is to be not merely conscious but self-conscious: it is to have the capacity to make oneself the object of one’s own consciousness and a corresponding potential to make oneself the object of one’s own will’ (Ridley 1998, p. 15). The nobles, at least as Nietzsche presents them in the First Essay, are self-conscious enough—though barely, and perhaps not always—to be the object of their own (self-affirming) consciousness, but have little or no reason to make themselves the objects of their own transformative will (and are not presented as doing so in Nietzsche’s account). They have, in this sense, half a conscience.

In this context, it is also worth citing Ridley’s discussion of why the original nobles are not Nietzsche’s models or goals (pp. 131-134). Although I disagree with some aspects of Ridley’s construal of human development as it is presented in the Genealogy, I think his basic account of Nietzsche’s dissatisfaction with the ancient nobles is correct.
In the same way, the artist-lawgivers appear even in Nietzsche’s account to have used the form of the debtor-creditor relationship rather than creating it themselves; they do not create wholly new forms so much as they create new systems of purposes within which to reinterpret and redirect already existing forms. I therefore think Nietzsche’s account can be interpreted to meet at least some of the objections expressed in Staten 2005, though certainly the rhetorical thrust of Nietzsche’s presentation of the artist-lawgivers, if nothing else, seems to suggest a human or cultural creation ex nihilo.

On this point see Aaron Ridley’s discussion of creative and noncreative ressentiment in Nietzsche’s Conscience (Ridley 1998, pp. 22-25).

Nietzsche’s use of Natur here rather than Wesen or Art, both of which he uses much more frequently than Natur, indicates that he is identifying this force powering the bad conscience as natural, as indeed he has identified the same force as natural when it manifests itself in the artist-lawgivers.

One might also think that the sense of self was too rudimentary or nonexistent for those being terrorized or tyrannized to experience the sense of personal aggrievement and rancor that are necessary for ressentiment. But the rest of Nietzsche’s treatment of ressentiment, especially his discussion of its relation to the earliest law codes in 2.11, suggests that the sense of self is well-developed enough to allow for ressentiment from almost the first moment of human sociability. Thus however primitive the sense of self and therefore of ressentiment at the founding of a political society, it is still a possibility, and its absence in those coerced by the law must be explained in another way.

I have been writing as if the slave and the priest are interchangeable, but in reality the priest complicates matters considerably. Although Nietzsche stresses the depth of the
priest’s experience of ressentiment (3.11), the priest’s value judgments seem to originate in a basic negation of or aversion to certain aspects of physical reality (specifically those involving the body: 1.6), not his political enemies, and however great his ressentiment towards the more physically powerful knightly aristocrats may be, he is eventually able to despise them (3.15). Thus the priest does not seem to be simply another instance or even simply a more capable or articulate version of the slave; while slave morality is at bottom just a thwarted and mendacious deformation of noble morality (an attempt to enjoy or experience a sensation of power by affirming oneself), the priest’s values and way of life seem largely unique, and to be based on a profound reaction against basic reality which makes him exceedingly creative (even if this creativity is ultimately disastrous for humanity).

16 Obviously, Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents is relevant here, but a comparison of Nietzsche and Freud is beyond the scope of this paper. Very briefly, though, I think that Nietzsche takes the side of civilization, or of human morality and self-creation, against both Freud and Rousseau, largely because for Nietzsche these things are set in motion by a dynamic, continually self-overcoming nature, rather than being a simple mutilation of an original, more or less fixed human nature composed of a set of drives that did not contain any inner necessity to develop and complicate themselves.

17 In time particular societies may impose a new order or discipline (Zucht) upon the biological instincts, but even then I believe Nietzsche’s view is that the bad conscience, here understood in its most penetrating and creative sense, remains alienated from them and constantly working to remake and overcome the socially imposed order or structuring of the drives. On the notion of socially inculcated instincts, see Conway 1997, pp. 30-34
and Chapter Two more generally (which, although specifically concerned with the problem of decadence in Nietzsche’s late thought, illuminates many important points in Nietzsche’s mature psychology).

Nietzsche’s language in this passage also announces the full sense in which nature has set itself the task of breeding an animal permitted to promise (2.1): the ultimate goal of humanity is not only for individual human beings to be able to promise as individuals, but for humanity to be able to promise as a species, to be able to promise something greater than and beyond the mere human; the goal of humanity, as of all great things, is to overcome itself and so to destroy itself by reaching its goal or endpoint, to reach a point where humanity is no longer the goal. Again, the bad conscience or the moral repression of instinct is not an impediment to reaching this goal but rather the condition of being able to pursue it at all.
Bibliography


