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Dissertation Abstract

The Ascetic Ideal and the Will to Power: A Reading of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Essay Three

The Project in Brief

This dissertation offers a reading of the Third Essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*—a reading with a focus on the self. I should note right away that "self" is largely my term, not Nietzsche's. It is not an ideal term, for it may give the impression of tracking a single word of Nietzsche's; I want to make clear that this is not the case. "Self" is, in my view, the best of several less-than-ideal alternatives that I might choose to pick out the concept under discussion. "Individual" strikes me as having misleading political connotations. "Agent" has Kantian/rationalistic connotations that feel entirely wrong. "Person" seems far too general. "Subject" wouldn't be bad, but I suspect it would suffer from the same problems that plague "self" (i.e. that it sounds like it's tracking a single German word that Nietzsche uses, which it is not). Further, given Nietzsche's explicit denial of "the subject," using "subject" to identify what it is that I'm focusing on in a reading of the *Genealogy* would be perverse. "Personality" is close, but, where "person" strikes me as too general, "personality" seems too specific; to me, "personality" usually connotes some, but not all, of the features that "self" connotes. In addition, most discussion of this concept in the secondary literature tends to use "self," and it seems to me best to follow the established terminology unless there is an overriding reason not to do so. Thus, I have settled on "self," albeit uneasily.

At first glance, focusing on the self in the *Genealogy* could appear to get things almost exactly backwards. The most obvious way to explain the *Genealogy* is to say that it aims to tell

us (where "us" means something like "modern Westerners") how our society's morality came to be the way that it is, and that story seems focused very much on the whole (that is, on the society) rather than on the parts (that is, on the individuals that make up a society). An attempt to focus on individuals—and even more specifically on individuals as discrete selves rather than in their role as parts of the society—seems to glorify a few trees at the expense of the forest.

In my view, though, Nietzsche isn't concerned with the forest, or at least not as solely concerned with the forest as many readings of the *Genealogy* take him to be. That is, he tells us a story of how our society's morality came to be as it is, but he tells us this story because he thinks it will tell us something about ourselves individually. The story of how our society came to be as it is is also the story of how we each came to be as we are. Each reader is supposed to recognize herself and her fellow Western moderns in the character types—the artist, the philosopher, and the priest—that Nietzsche discusses in the *Genealogy*. He discusses "the artist" not because he believes that there is something particularly fascinating about artists but because the case of the artist is supposed to illuminate some insights into particular people in a particular situation; it is meant to illuminate something about the kind of people who struggle with the ascetic ideal in the way that the artist struggles with it. He discusses "the philosopher" and "the priest" not because philosophers and priests are particularly interesting in themselves but because their struggles with the ascetic ideal are different from the artist's struggles, and these differences will give us insights into other kinds of people. In short, Nietzsche tells us the story of groups and societies, but he tells us those stories in order to tell us about the individuals that make up the groups and societies. This interest in individuals is sometimes obscured by Nietzsche's idiom. The "type" language, in particular, can mislead us into thinking that his sights are firmly trained

on the group. Even when he is discussing types, though, I contend that what really matters for him are the individual instances of a type rather than the type itself.

My reading, then, focuses on the individuals and on the clues that the *Genealogy* provides into Nietzsche's view of the self. In particular, I focus on what we might call "pathologies of the self,"[1] or ways that the self can develop in unhealthy and self-destructive directions due to perceived difficulties in the person's will to power. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche discusses three of these pathologies: *ressentiment*, bad conscience, and the ascetic ideal. In the dissertation, I focus on the ascetic ideal and the ways that it manifests in the three main types that Nietzsche discusses in the third Essay: namely, the artist, the priest, and the philosopher. In each chapter, I examine how the particular type falls prey to the ascetic ideal, what the attraction to the ascetic ideal tells us about the structure of the self of the attracted person, and what the person might do to overcome his attraction to the ascetic ideal. By focusing on the possibility of overcoming the ascetic ideal, I mean to highlight the claim that Nietzsche's project is not merely diagnostic but also therapeutic: he is not merely showing us how the pathologies of the self come about but is also providing some hints about strategies for overcoming them. Most of those hints, though, are just hints; he leaves it up to us to spell out the details. Thus, the parts of Chapters 2-4 that deal with overcoming attraction to the ascetic ideal are less straightforwardly exegetical and more focused on constructing reasonable arguments and trying to draw conclusions from the premises that Nietzsche offers.

Key Concepts

Three key concepts animate the dissertation: the self, the will to power, and the ascetic ideal. The self is, as I noted above, the most unexpected of these concepts, for most readings of

the *Genealogy* focus on its broader social and political aspects rather than on individual psychologies. But I focus on the self, and I argue that the *Genealogy* gives us the tools for constructing a Nietzschean account of the self. I then use this account of the self to illuminate Nietzsche's much-contested notion of the will to power. The connection between the self and the will to power becomes important in the later chapters, which explore the ascetic ideal as one instance of a "pathology of the self"—a defensive strategy to which a person turns in order to deal with problems in her will to power. I bring these three key concepts together in my discussions of overcoming the ascetic ideal, highlighting my claim that Nietzsche's project in the *Genealogy* is therapeutic: he believes that, with the right kind of work, some people can overcome their pathologies of the self.

The term "self" is not one that Nietzsche uses often, so attributing to him a view of "the self" is contentious. I argue that, although the word "self" is not a Nietzschean idiom, the concept of the self is one to which Nietzsche's thought applies. I suggest that the self is composed of a person's defining and constitutive characteristics—the characteristics that make someone "who she is." The task of determining which attributes should count as parts of the self can become an exercise in exclusion: claims about what is and is not the self draw a circle of inclusion around the chosen aspects, excluding all else. I argue that Nietzsche's major contribution to discussions of selfhood is to broaden that circle of inclusion; Nietzsche's view of what counts as the self is much more expansive than nearly all previous views. The Nietzschean self includes drives, tendencies, bodily attributes, desires—in short, everything. Nietzsche's inclusive account of the self pushes us to accept all of the messy, irrational, all-too-human aspects of our make-up as full-fledged parts of the self.

The central part of this manifold self—the part that we might see as the nucleus of the cell, or the star that anchors the planets—is the will to power. The phrase "will to power" [*Wille zur Macht*] is among the most contested bits of Nietzschean terminology, and commentators are well advised to tread carefully when constructing a view around this concept. I therefore spend time in the chapter both discussing what the term should be taken to mean and justifying my location of it at the conceptual center of my analysis. In terms of justification, my reading (which in some ways follows the reading offered by R.J. Hollingdale in *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*) notes that, although the concept of the will to power does not really crystalize for Nietzsche until *Zarathustra*, its roots are present embryonically at least as early as *The Gay Science*, and it becomes quite central in the post-*Zarathustra* works. The will to power is particularly omnipresent in *Beyond Good and Evil*, to which Nietzsche describes the *Genealogy* as a "Sequel" intended to "Supplement and Clarify." Thus, although the phrase "will to power" only appears a few times in the *Genealogy*, its centrality in *Beyond Good and Evil* provides, I think, good reason to grant it a similarly significant role in reading the *Genealogy*.

The will to power, on my reading, can be understood as the will to effectiveness in the world. This view of the will to power is compatible with several influential accounts of the will to power provided in the secondary literature—including Kaufmann[2], Hollingdale[3], Danto[4], Clark[5], and Reginster[6]—but my own view differs from most others in terms of its focus on individual psychology. One key consequence of my discussion of the will to power is the observation that Nietzsche is less concerned with the self as such than with self-perception. What matters is less whether one really *is* an effective agent in the world and more whether one *sees oneself as* an effective agent in the world. If someone does not see herself as an effective agent in the world—that is, if she feels that her will to power is always being thwarted—she will

often develop pathologies of the self, which function as various sorts of defensive strategies that help compensate for her feeling of ineffectiveness or allow her to repress that feeling or hide it from herself.

The later chapters of the dissertation show how various types of people—the artist, the priest, and the philosopher—develop a pathological reliance on what Nietzsche calls the "ascetic ideal." This ideal involves a cluster of beliefs about value: the belief that this life and this world are valueless, that genuine value, if such a thing exists at all, exists in a realm beyond and outside this world, and that gaining access to genuine, extra-worldly sources of value requires living a life of self-denial. I note that different types are attracted to the ascetic ideal for different reasons; thus, each type requires different strategies for breaking the grip of attraction to the ascetic ideal. My later chapters explore the reasons for each type's attraction to the ascetic ideal and lay out possible strategies for overcoming that attraction. In these chapters, I show that the accounts of the Nietzschean self and the will to power offered in the early chapters give us a clearer picture of both the possibilities and the limits of Nietzsche's therapeutic project.

Chapter Abstracts

The major portion of this dissertation examines that way that attraction to the ascetic ideal works for each of three types—artist, the priest, and the philosopher—with an eye toward discovering what strategies might help individuals who represent each type to overcome this particular pathology of the self. Before turning to this task, though, I need to address a foundational question: I have characterized attraction to the ascetic ideal as a "pathology of the self;" what is this "self" of which attraction to the ascetic ideal is meant to be a pathology? In Chapter 1, "Nietzsche and the (Sense of) Self," I offer a sketch of the Nietzschean self. In this

chapter, I argue that Nietzsche sees the self the self as a collection of drives, tendencies, desires, and so forth—an account of the self similar to Alexander Nehamas's coherence model[7]—and I focus in particular on the will to power as the core of this collection. The will to power, on my reading, can be understood as the will to effectiveness in the world.

The will to power as will to effectiveness is a specific second-order desire: namely, the desire to obtain the objects of my first-order desires under, so to speak, my own steam. I want the things that I want (i.e. I want to obtain the objects of my first-order desires), and my will to power wants to get those things in a certain way: I want for my obtaining of the objects of those first-order desires to count as an *achievement*, as something that *I did* rather than as something that *happened to me* as a happy accident.

One consequence of this account of the will to power is the observation that Nietzsche is less concerned with the self, full stop, than with self-*perception*. What matters is less whether one really is an effective agent in the world and more whether one *sees oneself as* an effective agent in the world. When someone does not see herself as an effective agent in the world, she is likely to develop pathologies of the self.

A second consequence of this account relates to questions of form and content. The will to power is, for the most part, formal, and its content is provided by the first-order desires. Formally, the will to power is the will to see oneself as effective in the world, which desire is generally achieved by the process of overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of the objects of particular first-order desires. Each individual's first-order desires, then, give content to his will to power. On its own, the will to power wants effectiveness, but exactly what will count as effectiveness will vary from person to person, and the variation will be determined by differences in the first-order desires. This form/content distinction helps us to identify the proper

object of Nietzschean therapy: Nietzschean therapy aims at the content, not the form. The form—that is, the desire for effectiveness—is unchangeable; what can be changed is the content of that desire—that is, the of the person's conception of what counts as effectiveness.

After sketching out the Nietzschean self and the role of the will to power in structuring that self, I turn to analyzing the ascetic ideal. In Chapter 2, I argue that the artist is attracted to the ascetic ideal because his weak sense of self causes him to perceive himself as somehow unreal—that is, as less of a full and successful participant in the world than other people. I argue that this feeling of unreality is linked to the artist's belief in a "true world"—a belief toward which Nietzsche directs much scorn, particularly in the later works. In some cases, the artist's belief in a "true world" fuels his feeling of unreality, and, in others, the feeling of unreality fuels the belief in the "true world." Thus, overcoming his attraction to the ascetic ideal require determining which difficulty is the cause and which the effect.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the priest and the ascetic ideal. I begin by noting an unexpected feature of Nietzsche's presentation of the priest: the priest is the type who appears to receive the longest discussion, but most of that discussion actually deals with the priest's effect on other types; of the priest himself, Nietzsche tells us surprisingly little. Thus, the first step in understanding the priest's attraction to the ascetic ideal is determining whether he himself is actually attracted to this ideal or whether he merely encourages others toward it. I argue that the priest is in fact drawn to the ascetic ideal (although perhaps not in the way we might at first expect) and thus is in the grip of a pathology of the self. The case of the priest, though, does not offer nearly so much cause for optimism as the case of the artist: the priest's pathology is rooted in what Nietzsche calls his "instincts." In my examination of the notion of Nietzschean instinct, I argue that his account of instinct is not limited to inborn behaviors and includes room for

changing at least some instincts. However, the priest's relevant instincts (that is, the instincts that relate to his attraction to the ascetic ideal) seem impervious to change. The priest appears to be hopeless as a candidate for Nietzschean therapy.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the philosopher, who in some ways represents an inversion of the case of the priest. Instincts are a key factor in both the priest's attraction to the ascetic ideal and the philosopher's attraction to it, but the roles that relevant instincts play are very different. The priest's instincts draw him to the ascetic ideal as the only viable option besides what Nietzsche calls "suicidal nihilism." The philosopher's instincts, on the other hand, draw her to the ascetic ideal because she sees in that ideal "an optimum condition for the highest and boldest spirituality and smiles" (GM III 7). That is, the philosopher sees in the ascetic ideal a belief system that complements her instincts and that will give her will to power its fullest possible scope. The asceticism of the philosopher thus should not be counted as a pathology of the self—at least, not at first. But certain ways of believing in the ascetic ideal can turn the philosopher's originally healthy attraction to the ideal into something self-destructive. A belief in the ascetic ideal can lead to a belief in the "true world" (as we see in the case of the artist), and the belief in the true world can lead to a feeling of ineffectiveness in this world—that is, to a weakening of the sense of self. Further, Nietzsche's story of the history of philosophers' belief in the ascetic ideal hints that the belief, though once vital to the enterprise of philosophy, has become a crutch and a hindrance. The modern philosopher, Nietzsche hints, has developed a pathological reliance on the ascetic ideal and needs a new belief system to allow a fuller and better expression of her will to power.

In the concluding section, I discuss the key implications of this project for understanding the *Genealogy* and Nietzsche's therapeutic project more generally, and I note some lines of

inquiry that I plan to explore as I revise the dissertation into a book-length project. In particular, I discuss my plan to add chapters discussing *ressentiment* and bad conscience, the pathologies of the self that Nietzsche discusses in Essays I and II and my plan, in the section on bad conscience, to explore the notion of cruelty as a manifestation of the will to power. Discussions of cruelty have become prominent in the secondary literature, and I will argue that this prominence may offer a misleading impression of Nietzsche's project by granting to cruelty a more central role than it actually plays. The new chapters and the discussion of cruelty will broaden my discussion of pathologies of the self to encompass the whole of the *Genealogy*, giving a broader and more complete picture of Nietzsche's therapeutic aims.

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[1] I am indebted to Bernard Reginster for this term.
[2] Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. 10th ed. (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1965).
[3] R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*. 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[4] Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. Expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.)
[5] Maudemarie Clark. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[6] Bernard Reginster. *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
[7] Alexander Nehamas, "How One Becomes What One Is," *Nietzsche*, eds. John Richardson and Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 255-280.