Morality as ressentment – with a discussion of some character traits

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Resumo

Uma das teses mais marcantes de Nietzsche diz respeito às origens da moralidade tradicional – fortemente influenciada pela visão de mundo cristã. Para Nietzsche, alguns dos traços de caráter comumente tidos como vícios não deveriam ser vistos como tais. Tais traços de caráter teriam adquirido conotações negativas na nossa linguagem corrente em razão da "revolta dos escravos" no terreno da moralidade. Partindo do pressuposto metodológico de que as conclusões de Nietzsche não necessariamente devem ser aceitas nem recusadas *in toto*, mas julgadas caso a caso, damos passos nesse trabalho no sentido de avaliar a tese de Nietzsche em sua concretude, tal como poderia ser aplicada na consideração de quatro vícios morais presuntivos, quais sejam o orgulho, a inveja, a cobiça e a luxúria. Cremos que há muito a ganhar com essa abordagem particularista.

Palavras-chave: Ética; genealogias morais; Nietzsche; ressentimento; revolta dos escravos.

Abstract

One of the most striking claims made by Nietzsche concerns the origins of traditional morality – which was strongly influenced by the Christian world-view. For Nietzsche, some character traits usually seen as vices should not be regarded as such. Such character traits are said to have acquired markedly negative connotations in our ordinary speech as a result of the "slave revolt in morality." Starting from the methodological assumption that Nietzsche's conclusions should not necessarily be either accepted or rejected *in toto*, but rather assessed on a case by case basis, I take some steps in this essay in order to evaluate Nietzsche's thesis in their concrete manifestations, as applied to a consideration of four alleged moral vices, namely pride, envy, greed and lust. I believe that there is much to be gained from such a piecemeal approach.

Keywords: Ethics; moral genealogies; Nietzsche; resentment; slave revolt.

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A few preliminary remarks are in order before I embark on a discussion, in connection with some specific character traits, of the plausibility of Nietzsche's view of traditional morality as embodying a set of attitudes which he takes to have their origins in the *resentment* felt by the weak and powerless towards the strong and powerful.

A critic might point to the obvious fact that Nietzsche wrote in German and that, as a consequence of that, his moral genealogies can only be properly approached by having in mind the German words for the virtues and vices discussed by Nietzsche, with whatever subtle shades of meaning these may have in his native language. There might be a great deal of truth in this criticism. Still, I do not think that my choice to write this essay in English renders my endeavors useless. I offer two reasons for this contention. Firstly, if there is any enduring philosophical value in Nietzsche's views on morality, it is only to be expected that they should be relevant to more than one particular country or culture, or else Nietzsche's thought could be of parochial interest only, which possibility strikes me as hardly plausible. Secondly, this paper is written from a methodological standpoint, the adoption of which is not affected by the language it is written in. The methodological assumption I base my analyses on is that Nietzsche's views concerning the origins of traditional morality should not be simply accepted or rejected *in toto*. Rather, their plausibility should be considered in the context of a discussion of specific character traits. This choice having been made, we can conduct an exploration into the matter and see for ourselves how satisfactory Nietzsche's genealogies are in particular cases.

Already at the start of this essay, I made clear my intention to talk of a few character traits only. It would be desirable to investigate many more. Space limitations prevent me from doing so. And, in any event, although my exploration is not as wide-ranging as it ideally should be, I believe it will expose the merits of assessing Nietzsche's claims in a way that is both tangible and firmly based on concrete examples.

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These methodological remarks having been taken care of, I should start the more substantive part of this essay by noting that Nietzsche's thinking on morality exemplifies, in one particular domain, his more general adherence to a thesis which is also to be found in his discussion of topics which one would normally regard as belonging to other areas of philosophy,

such as metaphysics and epistemology. The thesis in question, commonly referred to as *perspectivism*, amounts to a complete rejection of a notion of truth which takes it to be absolute and attainable in a way which need make no reference to the standpoint of the particular individuals who, being differently situated both socially and historically, have come to hold different, and often self-serving, opinions on what should count as true, as regards both what would ordinarily be taken to be matters of fact and – more importantly for the purposes of this essay – value judgments.

Unlike Kant or the Utilitarians, Nietzsche does not believe that one can come up with some precisely stateable and objectively true rational principle – equally binding on all people, regardless of what *sort* of people they are – which might serve to guide all of their actions in the moral sphere. Clearly, he is more concerned with the attainment of personal excellence, which, for him, need not necessarily be restrained by the injunctions and prohibitions of ordinary morality. Moreover, in keeping with the above emphasis on the fact that there are different sorts of people, the highest degree of personal excellence is not, for Nietzsche, something that can be achieved by all.

Given Nietzsche's apparent insistence that mankind is naturally divided into two groups, the weak and the strong,[1] and his view of the latter as being better endowed with the traits which enable them to excel in their pursuit of whatever is great, heroic or sublime, after a fashion which makes it possible for them to enjoy the delights of overflowing self-expression, it is only natural that Nietzsche should – against the backdrop of the inevitability of perspectivism – favor the perspective of the strong.

Interestingly, the moral perspective of the strong, "master morality", contrasts sharply with the "slave morality"[2] of the weak. While, as noted by Solomon (1996), both perspectives see themselves as expressions of objective truth, they differ importantly in that master morality is in no need of rationalization. In Solomon's (1996, p. 200) words: "The master sees himself and his outlook as simply superior, although the standards according to which he is superior are, of course, his own, unexamined and self-fulfilling". Slave morality, on the other hand, is a more complex affair. Slave morality, firmly grounded in the peculiar emotion which Nietzsche calls *resentment*, is reactive in character, in that it regards master morality as

[1] For the moment, we need not concern ourselves with the extent to which, for Nietzsche, strength and power are to correlated, for any given individual, with his possession of things such as wealth, political domination or artistic and intellectual prowess.

[2] So-called in virtue of its typically denoting a perspective that favors the poor and downtrodden.

false and ignoble. Since the weak cannot generally hope to achieve the worldly success of the strong, which is both promoted by, and reflected in, the values they take most to heart, the weak's *resentment*, bred by their sense of their own impotence and inferiority, has effected a perverse devaluation of the values cherished by the strong.

"The slave revolt in morality" – says Nietzsche (1967, p. 36) in *On the genealogy of morals* – "begins when *resentment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *resentment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge". In its defensiveness, slave morality overthrows the values of the powerful, turning them into vices. In Solomon's (1996, p. 208) succinct formulation: "If the masters prize strength, then celebrate meekness. If they cherish wealth, celebrate poverty".

Worse still, the values fostered by this revolt – values that have come to inform not only ordinary people's moral perception but the theorizing of most moral philosophers in the Western tradition – are, as Nietzsche sees them, characteristically life-denying. In urging the suppression of the passions, ordinary morality is at odds with much (or most) of what is constitutive of human nature. Nietzsche's concern with this aspect of our traditional moral outlook – neatly expressed in the title of the section "Morality as anti-nature", in his *Twilight of the idols* – is evinced in his analysis of the use Christian morality makes of the mistaken assumption that the occasional destructiveness and stupidity of the passions provides one with good reasons to seek their abolition: "*Destroying* the passions and cravings, merely as a preventive measure against their stupidity and the unpleasant consequences of this stupidity – today this strikes us as merely another acute form of stupidity" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 486-487). In one of those insights that display the psychologist in him, Nietzsche further maintains that such a radical stance "is instinctively chosen by those who are too weak-willed, too degenerate to impose moderation on themselves" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 487).

It is, thus, understandable that, for Nietzsche, this life-denying component of morality shows itself at its worst in the ascetic practices found in some of the world's major religions, some of which - notably Christianity, Nietzsche's target in so much of his work - further undermine a proper appreciation of the value of life by claiming that true happiness can only be attained in an afterlife, to which, on at least some interpretations, only the faithful can hope to aspire.

Later in this essay, I will address the plausibility of Nietzsche's view that morality was born out of *resentment*, in its application to four specific

character traits: pride, envy, greed and lust. Traditional morality – in particular, Judeo-Christian morality – considers all of those to be vices. Nietzsche rejects this view and regards the outlook of ordinary morality on these traits as being life-denying. Bearing in mind the fact that his thesis is both historical (and, indeed, argued for on philological grounds in *On the genealogy of morals*), in that Nietzsche is concerned with uncovering the sources of our moral prejudices, and psychological, in that *resentment* not only was but may still be operational in determining people's moral outlook, I wish to inquire as to whether or not Nietzsche would have good grounds for holding his thesis in a few selected cases which might be held to exemplify the alleged devaluation – via *resentment* – of the attitudes and values which were cherished by the masters prior to the slave revolt in morality.

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After reading Nietzsche, and some of the secondary literature on his work, one is bound to be quickly disabused of the preconceived idea, if one was ever in the grips of such a misapprehension, that Nietzsche was a Thrasimachus-like sort of immoralist, eager to maintain that all is permitted to the strong and that there is nothing of any worth in the usual catalogue of virtues. He clearly seems to have a high opinion of such traits as honesty – to others and to oneself –, courage, generosity and, as we have seen above, self-control (with the latter virtue being specially relevant for what is to follow).

Although he is prone to refer to himself as an immoralist, his main goal does not seem to have been the wholesale rejection of morality, but rather that of exposing all that is hypocritical and mendacious in much of our inherited moral views. He was particularly interested in exposing the concealed sickliness that lies at the bottom of some people's moral behavior.

With that in mind, we may proceed on our attempt to find out if traditional morality's devaluation of pride, envy, greed and lust is indeed likely to have been effected by the *resentment* of the weak.

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Pride. In one of its sub-entries, *The American Heritage Dictionary* informs us that pride is "An excessively high opinion of oneself; conceit." This is in stark contrast with other definitions offered on the same page: "A sense of one's own proper dignity or value; self-respect" and "Pleasure or satisfaction taken in one's work, achievements, or possessions." We can see thus that the word 'pride' can also be taken to refer, less ponderously than in the first entry quoted, to a healthy, non-aggressive and justifiable satisfaction with one's accomplishments, which in being communicated to others need not be taken to constitute an offense to their own self-esteem, even if they have lesser achievements of their own. In its excessive praise of humility, and sometimes, abject displays thereof, and in its utter rejection of pride, in whichever of its manifestations, some expressions of Christian morality do unjustifiably undermine one of the foundations of men's sense of their own value. And insofar as it insists, as has often been the case historically, that our worldly sources of satisfaction, in our work and even in competition with others, fare miserably in comparison with the glory that is to come after our physical demise, Christian morality does adopt an attitude for which the epithet "life-denying" is entirely fitting.

Besides, the hypothesis that such a rejection of the value of pride, even in its life-affirming forms, may have been historically brought about by the feelings of impotence of the weak – regardless of whether their weakness is material, artistic or intellectual – people who, simmering with *resentment*, cannot bring themselves to honestly concede that they too would like to have something of which they could be proud, is a hypothesis which strikes me as both plausible and respectable. And to claim that *resentment*, quite apart from the historical role it may have played in the reshaping of values, may still lurk deep in the hearts of those who envy the accomplishments or talent of others and look down on their self-assertive stance is not only to hold a tenable view, but nearly an obviously correct one.

Envy. The last paragraph has naturally introduced envy as a predictable accompaniment of *resentment*. Although I suspect that the word is, in informal usage, not necessarily infused with bad connotations, *The American Heritage Dictionary* takes a decisively dim view of it, and this is the interpretation I intend to focus on. The word 'envy' is defined in this dictionary as "A feeling of discontent and resentment aroused by another's desirable possessions or qualities, accompanied by a strong desire to have them for oneself" – surely a character trait that deserves no praise. On this view of the matter, then, to envy someone is not merely to wish to resemble

the object of one's envy in the possession of whatever advantages – physical, material, intellectual and so on – which he may happen to enjoy. Envy further involves ill-will or spite towards whoever is envied. And, as a matter of empirical fact, it is surely true to say that the envious person, unlike the person who, in a benign way, seeks to emulate his betters, often hopes not only to do better than those he envies, but to actually see their downfall.

Although one might hold that envy may be life-affirming to the extent that it might prompt one to work hard in the pursuit of one's goals, and in so doing, to reach high levels of excellence in one's endeavors, I would maintain, arguably *contra* Nietzsche, that envy is a life-denying trait. There is no guarantee to the one who envies that he will succeed in surpassing the person envied in whatever it is that is at stake. While his attempts may be rewarded, they may no less likely prove themselves to have been in vain, in which case the envy that the envious person started with is sure to hurt him even more painfully and stick to his psyche like a sting. In fact, the person who is consumed with envy is no more than a prisoner of such a feeling.

In maintaining that envy is a vice, even a sinful disposition of character, traditional morality does not, to my mind, give a distorted expression to *resentment*. Rather, it implicitly acknowledges the corrosive effect of envy on those who have to struggle with this feeling.

Greed. This particular word is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as an "Excessive desire to acquire or possess, as wealth or power, beyond what one needs or deserves". The use of the adjective 'excessive' of itself makes it hard to think of greed in less than a negative way. As I see it, greed is rightly chastised as a trait which may be harmful to society – witness the massive inequalities in the distribution of the world's wealth and the dire environmental consequences of the rich nations' consumerist lifestyle – and to the individual who, being in the grips of such a vice, lets it poison his entire existence by depriving him of a proper appreciation of much else that is important in life besides the acquisition of personal wealth, power or glory.

It should be recalled that Nietzsche's writings show his dislike for democracy, socialism and his mistrust of plebeian thinkers and their attitudes. In *Twilight of the idols*, he dismisses Socrates' social background without further ado: "In origin, Socrates belonged to the lowest class: Socrates was plebs" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 474) and wonders if his philosophizing was compromised by his lowly origins: "Is the irony of

Socrates an expression of revolt? Of plebeian *resentment*?" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 476). And he severely chastises the democratism of the German universities of his day, in their attempts to make higher education accessible to a larger number of people. It would seem highly improbable, then, that he would be much moved by considerations of social justice. It appears to be the case that, for Nietzsche, the weak and powerless, in all walks of life, have little or no legitimate claim on a greater share of society's material goods.

Nevertheless, given the prize put by Nietzsche on moderation in the exercise of one's passions, it seems unlikely that he would condone men's overindulgence in the pursuit of material goods and their enjoyment. Therefore, it would be probably wrong to say that Nietzsche is keen on exalting greed as such. Rather more relevantly as far as Nietzsche's thinking is concerned, it should be borne in mind that traditional Christian morality, with its long history of denigration of wealth and property – sometimes wholly unconcerned with their just distribution – commonly amounts to a rejection not only of greed proper but also of far less extreme forms of material acquisitiveness. Asceticism has led many believers to entirely renounce this-worldly goods, on the assumption that, in doing so, they would please the Lord by showing their disgust with bodily pleasures and comforts and their love of the higher values that transcend men's existence on earth.

Now if one takes Nietzsche's target to be the Christian outright rejection of the sources of satisfaction that are made available to men through their possession of those material goods which make such satisfaction possible – the view that the enjoyment of such goods is an evil in itself – it will seem obvious that Nietzsche's position has much to commend it. For, whether or not there is a soul that survives the death of the body, it is still the case that human beings, or most of them at the very least, have, in their embodied existence, needs and desires – such as the enjoyment of food, drink, and decent housing, not to mention the access to the artistic and intellectual goods, made possible by a sufficient possession of material resources – that it is not sensible to expect them to renounce to. To the extent that it denigrates the pleasures and satisfactions of this life, Christian morality has said 'No' to life, as Nietzsche rightly claims.

And it seems plausible, in this case, that the *resentment* of the weak and powerless may have indeed played a role in bringing about an excessive and unjustifiable devaluation and, worse still, moral condemnation, of men's natural desire for the enjoyment of the sort of goods that a natural acquisitiveness is conducive to. In realizing that they were no match for the

strong in the competition for material goods, the weak may have been led to demonize the very pursuit of such goods, without acknowledging their real motivation, namely to avenge themselves on their masters and betters by replacing the latter's life-affirming moral code with a slave morality that valued the ascetic ideal and the promise it holds for life everlasting. Needless to say, *resentment* may still be at work in some people's renunciation of the goods made available to other people through material prosperity.

Lust. To many, this word seems to have decidedly negative connotations only. In *The American Heritage Dictionary*, we find the following definition: "Intense or unrestrained sexual craving." To the extent that such a craving is merely intense, it is rather questionable whether lust deserves moral condemnation. It is rather obvious that the word's negative connotation pertains to the excessive, unrestrained, even overwhelming power by which such a craving is attended.

However, in the light of his above-mentioned concern with moderation, it is again doubtful that Nietzsche would condone any form of unrestrained or wild sexual abandon. Rather, his target seems to be Christian morality's wholesale rejection of the value of sexuality and its failure to see it as a healthy and integral component of human nature. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul's harsh admonitions against extramarital sex hardly conceal his low view of sexuality as such: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to be married than to be aflame with passion" (*The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, p. 1383). And his earlier remark in the same chapter clearly shows that he takes the condition of the celibate man to be preferable to that of the married man: "I wish that all were as I myself am."

In taking sex to be no more than an unavoidable concomitant of procreation, devoid of any intrinsic worth apart from its role therein, and in regarding the flesh as base, Christian morality is indeed to blame for much that is bad in the moral outlook of the West. For most people's predictable failure in living up to such hard demands has led many to be bedeviled by unnecessary feelings of guilt about their natural drives. Besides, the psychoanalytic tradition seems to have gone some way to show that attempts at the repression of sexual urges may play a major role in the onset of mental disorders. To say 'No' to as vital a human need as the enjoyment of one's sexuality is to say 'No' to life, if anything is. Fittingly, Nietzsche makes, in one of his *ad hominem* tirades, an appropriately caustic comment, aimed at the proponents of repressive forms of sexual morality: "The

radical hostility, the deadly hostility against sensuality, is always a symptom to reflect on: it entitles us to suppositions concerning the total state of one who is excessive in this manner" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 487).

However, a thought may well give us pause at this point. What are the underlying motivations of traditional morality's denigration of sex? Could it be the case that, as in other instances in which the masters' values were overthrown, the weak's *resentment* played an important part in promoting the devaluation of what was once prized and cherished?

Unlike the possession of riches or the performance of great deeds, deriving satisfaction from sexuality is not the sort of thing that is restricted, of necessity, to a lucky few. Obviously, sexual partners may be found by people in all walks of life – and not solely among the strong and powerful, as opposed to the weak, if the latter group is here taken to encompass the poor, the downtrodden or the intellectually underachieved. In fact, what could it mean for one person to naturally belong to the weak in connection with sexuality?

Perhaps, Nietzsche might argue that the slaves, unlike their masters, could not have, in virtue of their condition, a sexual life that was as varied and colorful as that of their aristocratic rulers and that they have predictably come to resent their masters' superiority in this regard, as in so many others – an attitude which would ultimately lead them, in due course, to deny that there was much of any value in a sort of pleasure in which they themselves could not sufficiently indulge. That seems hardly convincing, though. There is hardly any reason to think, for one thing, that promiscuity need be restricted to any particular social group. For another, it is not obviously the case that sexual satisfaction is, for most people, simply – or, indeed, at all – a matter of having an overabundance of sexual partners.

Besides, is it really *resentment*, rather than, more plausibly, the experience of living in overly repressive societies and of being inculcated from an early age with its religious values, that leads so many otherwise enlightened people, to take, even in our secularized age, such a dim view of the value of sexuality?

Moreover, I think that, as a matter of historical fact, one might make good a case for a view which takes sexual repression not to be necessarily favored only by the weak and poor people that Nietzsche believes to have been instrumental in promoting the Judeo-Christian moral outlook. As history amply shows, sexual repression often goes hand in hand with social and economic oppression more broadly construed. Augustus, among others, comes to mind, if one recalls the way in which he actively encouraged conservative sexual mores after seizing power in imperial Rome.

Furthermore, as has been interestingly argued for in Engels's *Origin of family, private property and state*, the sexual repression of women in particular – in the context of a sexual morality which, in its bearing on the institution of marriage, has tended to be much more lenient with male infidelity – may have been historically influenced by a concern with the transmission of property. This appears to amount to a tenable account of the origin of some aspects of traditional sexual morality. It is at once evident that if the Marxists were right about sexual repression, its origins would seem to be due to the historically conditioned actions of the strong, rather than of the weak. And this account of the matter is surely a far cry from Nietzsche's.

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