The Philosophical Function of Genealogy

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I.

It is seldom in dispute that genealogy, or genealogical accounts are central to Nietzsche’s philosophic enterprise. The role that genealogy plays in Nietzsche’s thought is little understood, however, as is Nietzsche’s argumentation in general, and, for that matter, what Nietzsche might be arguing for. In this paper I attempt to summarize Nietzsche’s genealogical account of modern ethical practices and offer an explanation of the philosophical import of genealogy.

The difficulties in coming to understand the philosophical function of genealogy are obvious. Genealogy, whatever else we say about it, offers a story of the genesis of contemporary ethical beliefs and practices. The story that Nietzsche gave is obviously a revisionist one, and Nietzsche seldom cites specific historical evidence; although it contains many historical allusions, the presentation is thematic or even mythical. At the same time, Nietzsche’s interests were primarily ethical: he seems to be attempting, in some novel way, either to solve or to eliminate philosophical problems about norms and values. In particular, he offered his genealogy as part of a critique of specifically “modern” values and the advancement of an “immoralism” that would take their place. So the difficulties are: it is unclear what status we should accord Nietzsche’s stories in particular, and it is unclear what role any story about the emergence of modern values can play in an assessment of those values. We seem to need a reason to take Nietzsche’s account as particularly authoritative, and then an explanation of how his account does in fact bear upon the normative status of “modern values.”
We can categorize the standard attempts philosophically to place Nietzschean genealogy by dividing them up into four categories, consisting of two possibilities in each of two dimensions. The categories do not pertain to the interpreter, but to Nietzsche as interpreted. There are no ideal-types here, and the interpretations do not come self-identifying. But nearly every one qualifies either as a “Humean” or “Enlightenment” interpretation, or as a “Postmodern” one, and each of these interpretations comes in a “cautious” and a “carefree” version.

According to the Humean or Enlightenment interpretation, the purpose of genealogy is, roughly, to manipulate our attitude towards so-called “higher” values by casting them in an unfavorable light. By showing that moral values and assessments, along with tradition, superstition, and prejudice, have a “base” origin, we are disabused of any notion that they might possess a privileged status. In the “cautious” version of this interpretation, the influence that genealogy exerts is purely causal, rather than epistemic or normative: genealogy happens to lead us away from defective beliefs. In this way it prepares us to be receptive to genuinely philosophical doctrines or arguments: perhaps something about the will to power or eternal recurrence, or in a recent interpretation, an account of the typology and mechanisms of human nature. In the “carefree” version this persuasive task itself takes on philosophical importance: that these ethical beliefs or practices in fact have this origin is adequate to discredit them, not merely in the sense of causing us to find them unappealing, but in the sense of determining that they are bad or wrong. “[Nietzsche] intends for [genealogy] to come up with a definitive valuation of the traditional moral virtues and principles.”

According to the Postmodern interpretation, genealogy is something of an aberration, but is best explained as an attempt to show the ruptures, lacunae, arbitrariness, and randomness in
all of our sense-making and ethical practices. Genealogy, on this account, does not show the continuity of apparently disparate views, but the radical breaks and conclusive failures in the attempts of Western man to understand her place in the world. Again, there is a cautious and a carefree version. According to the cautious version, again, genealogy *per se* does not have any philosophical import; it merely clears the way for the philosophic work proper — in this case, not to argue or interpret anything, but often to *do* something — laugh or play or dance in a manner free from ressentiment and unconstrained by the ascetic tradition. In the carefree version, the ruptures which genealogy (playfully) exhibits are themselves philosophical activity: genealogy not only shows us the inescapable failures of our sense-making and self-critical abilities, it returns us to a celebration of unreason or of primal urges or simply to a “radical pluralism.”

These interpretations carry clear defects. On the cautious versions, genealogy has no philosophic importance; it is merely preparatory to the ‘real’ doctrines, which are to be found in obscurity elsewhere. This seems implausible because it makes most of Nietzsche’s work extraneous to his philosophical position, as if it could all be eliminated without philosophic loss. Also, many cautious Enlightenmentists need to rely on the *Nachlass* to find his ‘real’ argumentation, and offer a conclusion that is dogmatic or metaphysical in a way which would invite Nietzsche’s suspicion rather than allegiance; all, I think, offer a conclusion that could have been presented economically and therefore seems detached from Nietzsche’s actual presentation. The Postmodernists tend to suffer from a lack of evidence in general. They take heart from passages like, “. . . the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart . . .” (*GM* II:12). But this seems more like a statement of what gives genealogy something to do rather than what would make it
an exercise in futility made manifest. And, as Nietzsche insisted, “It is true that everything in
the domain of morality has become and is changeable, unsteady, everything is in flux; but
everything is also flooding forward, and towards one goal” (HH 107).

And I take it that the cautious positions have only been attractive as attempts at evading
the carefree positions. Indeed, with the notable exception of Georges Bataille, the carefree
positions belong to those who take pains to be unsympathetic to Nietzsche: Alasdair MacIntyre
on the Enlightenment side, and Jürgen Habermas on the Postmodern side. The Carefree
Enlightenment position is often constructed as an example of the so-called “genetic fallacy”:
inferring the worth of something from its origin. But Nietzsche took great pains explicitly to
deny that this was what he was doing. In fact, Nietzsche identified such an association
between origin and value as something sick, ascetic. The Carefree Postmodernist invites us to
witness the consequences of the “self-denial of reflection”: an appeal to mythic origins, the
breaking of taboos, the destruction of social convention, and, of course, totalitarianism. But
Nietzsche seemed to be, if anything, reflective — “questioning and questionable” (GM III:9) as
he himself said — and his invocation of myth was seldom and ironic. And it’s not clear how
much room there is to interpret anyone as both transgressive and authoritarian.

The functioning of Nietzschean genealogy is complex, but, in the account that I shall
present, genealogy recounts the history of ethical “ideals” in terms of their purposiveness, and
assesses them in terms of their success or failure. Nietzsche argued that ethical ideals are
themselves functional: they serve to structure the conduct and understanding of life. Nietzsche’s
genealogy, then, does not purport to offer historical facts with inherent normative implications,
but the functional assessment of ideals in terms of their own internal standards. Genealogy as a
specifically historical account is thus necessary in Nietzsche’s philosophic enterprise for two
reasons. First, genealogy is needed because Nietzsche aims to provide an internal examination of the logic of practices rather than a theoretical critique. Since his commitments regarding the “value of truth” seem to render a refutation unavailable, Nietzsche strategy is to explain the unity and necessary failure of certain pervasive ethical practices. Second, genealogy is needed because its explanatory burden does not relate to a single, static subject matter, but to transformations in the very standards of what could count as success.

II.

Although Nietzsche does not employ the term “genealogy” to describe his work very often, we should be able to arrive at an interpretation which does not drive us to cautiousness. That is, we should be able to ascribe philosophical significance to genealogy itself. Nietzsche did devote an entire book to the matter. More importantly, we have a suggestion from Nietzsche that genealogy marks off precisely what is distinctive about his philosophy: the *Genealogy of Morals*, he wrote, is “my touchstone for what belongs to me” (CW epi fn). Nietzsche suggested that not merely the stories of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, but all of his work, at least from *Human, All-too-human* on, was genealogical (*GM* P4).

But other than to call it the “contrary” (or, by implication, the “right-side-up” version) of English genealogy (*GM* P4), Nietzsche was not explicit about what, exactly, his version of genealogy consists in. There are, however, four formal characteristics that can serve to identify Nietzsche’s approach. Genealogy, first of all, concerns all that which Nietzsche places under the rubric of “values”: ethical beliefs, practices, institutions, customs, norms, and so on. Nietzsche was interested above all in how people make assessments and direct their lives, and this is what he wants to put himself in a position to assess. Secondly, the subject matter of genealogy, in particular, is the *origin* of particular values and norms, not in the sense of a single
point or event, but as a long process or history.

The third formal characteristic of genealogy is that it concerns the *purposive* character of values and norms. That is, Nietzsche’s stories do not merely report the adoption or rejection of particular beliefs, or the gradual mutation of one code of conduct into another. The story of causal antecedents is subsidiary to the function of illuminating the available meanings of ideals. Nietzsche treated all ethical beliefs and practices as themselves purposive: attempts to structure the conduct of life in a certain directed way. This is the “psychological” aspect to Nietzsche’s work — his insistence on the question, “what were they trying to achieve? . . .” Rather than simply taking them at face value, genealogy considers, for example, preferences or the recognition of a rule as at least partly constitutive of some greater pursuit. The relationship between particular ethical “ideals” and the overarching purposiveness in which they play a part is always, according to Nietzsche, dynamic and variable. But genealogy tracks the changing purposiveness behind ethical ideals, and thus can ascertain whether they are, so considered, successful or not.

The final formal characteristic, which is closely connected to the previous one, is that genealogy concerns the *meaning* of ethical ideals. An account in terms of the meaning of ideals, thought Nietzsche, unifies seemingly disparate phenomena: for example, Nietzsche interpreted priests, scientists, artists, and atheistic free spirits all as fundamentally ascetic “types.” Conversely, it allows for distinctions among superficially similar phenomena. Without the discriminations that meaning allows, genealogy would lose its present and future relevance: it could not incorporate new phenomena. Meaning, further, represents a dimension of assessment that allows for unlimited specificity. Instead of relying on, say, conformity to law or the realization of given ends, genealogy facilitates assessment in terms of all the *sui generis*
concerns that can be brought to bear: typically, whether an ideal is a sign of flourishing, subtlety, health, ambition, desire, and hope, or slavishness, weakness, cowardice, incoherence, and resignation.

We can also identify three functional characteristics of genealogy. Genealogy serves as Nietzsche’s central “no-saying” (*EH* “Books” BGE:1) or critical activity: it provides the leverage with which to scrutinize and find fault with defective viewpoints. Second, genealogy is what affords self-knowledge to modern humanity. According to Nietzsche we have grown too complex, too polysemous for “direct self-observation” (*AOM* 223), so genealogy is “where the beehives of our knowledge are” (*GM* P1). Finally, genealogy enables us to assess the “value of values” (*GM* P6); through genealogy we not only find fault with viewpoints, but also get at the question of what our commitment to particular values should be, and ultimately to the all-important matter of our “health.” The question that Nietzsche posed with regard to ethical ideals was: what are they worth to us? For Nietzsche, coming to terms with the status or authority of ethical values was itself a matter of ethical evaluation. One poses higher-order questions about our ideals in order to determine what our commitment to them should be:

*Have they hitherto hindered or furthered human prosperity? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or is there revealed in them, on the contrary, the plenitude, force, and will of life, its courage, certainty, future?* (*GM* P3)

Genealogy offers an account in which answers to these sorts of questions can be found, and by so doing provides the means to address the value of values.

Considered in this light, much of Nietzsche’s writing can be seen as genealogical in character. And more importantly, we can see that genealogy as so conceived serves its philosophical function: providing a descriptive or explanatory account with normative implications. If we look at genealogy as a means of bringing considerations of purposiveness and meaning together with considerations of normativity into a single account, the form of the argument emerges. Nietzsche argued that ethical ideals are functional, and thus, by examining
the functional history of ideals, one can assess them in terms of their effectiveness. Ideals serve a purpose: they are a means of structuring one’s life and self-understanding. So as a minimal constraint on an ideal it must ‘work’; the authority of an ethical ideal is ultimately connected to its sustainability. In particular, Nietzschean genealogy shows the unity and pervasiveness of one ideal, the “ascetic ideal,” and argues that this ideal does not work, and is thus unavailable to us: it can no longer be affirmed. The ascetic ideal, claimed Nietzsche, is no longer effective on its own implicit terms: it is incapable of serving to explain, justify, or guide action; it does not enable us to distinguish among more and less authoritative reasons; it cannot command adherence; it provides no horizon of sense-making. Genealogy further explains this failure of the ascetic ideal as a conclusive, irremediable one. Nietzsche, in fact, identified it as a “necessary” one. He argued that the internal character of the ascetic ideal led to its demise: its very advancement ultimately brought about its destruction. Finally, Nietzsche tried to show that this unavailability of the ascetic ideal made it impossible for it to be accorded any authority. Nor, claimed Nietzsche, does the failure of the ascetic ideal leave us trapped in an ironic doom in which we cannot avoid giving our allegiance to ideals from which we are permanently estranged. To place the source of normative authority so distant from human agency would be an unsustainable repetition of asceticism.

III.

In what immediately follows I shall attempt to lay out some of the details of Nietzsche’s genealogical account. Obviously, I cannot give a definitive account here of each of the phenomena that Nietzsche identified. But this schematic presentation should at least make clear how those phenomena fit into Nietzsche’s historical argument, and how the historical argument serves his broader argumentative ends. In particular, I hope to illuminate the two ways in which genealogy accounts for its own indispensability: namely, by showing that ideals falter not through theoretical defects but through particularly historical failures, and by showing that historical attempts at self-determination have altered the possibilities of self-determination.
We can identify seven basic stages in the genealogy of morals. There are certainly more: since Nietzsche does not present his accounts in a single narrative, but usually as disparate explanations of particular phenomena, at the very least some hybrid and ambiguous stages could be culled from the text. But, for present purposes, faithfulness to every detail is less important than capturing the functional outlines of the narrative. And there should be no doubt that Nietzsche’s many genealogies comprise the genealogy of morals. What unifies the disparate accounts, apart from the many places at which they intersect and their culmination in GM III’s discussion of the ascetic ideal, is that they form a present perspective on our past, on what according to Nietzsche is our moral history.

The first three stages should probably be considered prehistorical, if not mythical: one in which a community is formed in the face of external threats, one characterized predominantly by the “pathos of distance,” and one whose distinguishing mark is widespread cruelty. In the first, a “long struggle with essentially uniform unfavorable conditions” (BGE 262) fixes a social order. Constrained by necessity, a number of persons organize themselves in some determinate way, with rigid social roles, hierarchies, customs, and traditions. A community is formed in which there is a tremendous divide between the nobles, who charge themselves with maintaining the social order, and the multitude.

The second stage begins when threats to the community, both internal and external, have abated. In moments of relative ease the nobles turned to self-glorification and self-reverence (BGE 260, 287). Once the nobles started to become aware of their power, they honored themselves and their station, and, according to Nietzsche, “a concept of political superiority always resolves itself into a concept of superiority of soul” (GM I:6). So the nobles’ self-expressions of their intuitive sense of superiority became the beginning of all values:

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\text{it was “the good” themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed, and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their activity as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common, and vulgar. It was out of this pathos of distance that they first took the right to create value and to coin names for values . . . . (GM I:2)}
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Although the nobles are characterized by an inchoate form of being “truthful”\textit{(GM I:5)}, theirs were not subtle or well-considered assessments. On the contrary, ethics begins with a mere pathos, a prereflective sentiment of the socially superior of their own superiority. This pathos, however, involved so little ability to take account of and express itself, that it quickly broke down. As pathos it was always tenuous and indeterminate, so in order for such “distance” to be maintained, some means of social propagation was necessary. This brings us to the third stage.

The nobles, according to Nietzsche, took so little heed of others that their spontaneous self-expressions could be vicious and cruel. Lacking any conscience to become clouded, the nobles were capable, almost by vocation, of losing themselves to monstrous outbursts of violence.\textit{Cruelty} was for the nobles first of all a “voluptuous pleasure”\textit{[Wolfust]} \textit{(GM II:5)}: it was an “enchantment,” a “seduction” in which one indulged if one could \textit{(GM II:7)}. But more importantly, cruelty was a means of rendering their assessments, especially their self-ascriptions, the compelling ones. Violence was the sole original means for establishing and maintaining values, and to make someone believe in something, adhere to something, or revere something required a tremendous amount of force exerted consistently over a long time. In order to sustain their authority the nobles needed to enforce it publicly, so they made their power manifest to others by giving it a visible sign in someone’s pain (cf. \textit{HH I:103}).

These first three stages are not very important. The beginning of Nietzsche’s genealogy does not impart any great lesson for the simple reason that it has little to do with us. Our lives are not governed by threats to our continued existence, or by childish but vicious nobles. Nietzsche did not glorify origins, praise violence, or applaud unreflectiveness. These are elements of the most remote part of a story; they function primarily as a prehistory of the later stages. Already, however, the story conveys a point in that each one of these stages represents a \textit{failure}: they are gone, and it is almost inconceivable that they could make a comeback. Nietzsche identified certain phenomena as precursors to what we would recognize as familiar ethical commitments, and then told a story about them. The result was functional history rather than reportage. Nietzsche’s aim was not to recount actual events, but to provide an accurate
account of how our ideals originated in much different ones. The story portrays the ideals as, although not self-contradictory, defective: they fail in a way that can only be understood in terms of internal flaws. Nietzsche abstracted from historical particulars in order to make the point that the disappearance of certain phenomena in our historical self-understanding was not due to fortuitous events, but to their own inherent instability. No matter when, where, or how they play out, they fail but lead in a natural way to successively more complex and recognizable attempts to establish something analogous.

The generalized depiction of these historical failures is thus meant to illustrate a minimal constraint on any normative authority; identifying the flaws of the past informs us as to what will not work at present. On Nietzsche’s telling, authoritative norms and values originally depended on some form of social and political authority. These stages are now lost to us, however, because of shortcomings in their public character: they lacked the means to sustain themselves in ongoing social existence. Such authority must be able to fulfill a certain public role for it to be what it is, and we can understand the irretrievability of some ethical outlooks in terms of their functional inadequacy in this regard. External threats, merely subjective self-affirmation, and as we shall see, violence, do not work, so there can be no more authority which relies on them.

The nobles of course lost their power, and their defeat constitutes the fourth stage in Nietzsche’s genealogy. With nothing but physical force available to them, the nobles met challenges to their authority exclusively with modulations of cruelty. This provoked hostility on the part of the oppressed, but deference and fear prevented them from manifesting it. Without any outlet for their hostility, however, it fed on itself, and out of this “cauldron of unsatisfied hatred”(GM I:11) came ressentiment. This one “reactive” sentiment consumed the psychic lives of those who suffered or feared suffering. Their lives came to revolve around feelings of malice toward the nobles, and dominate their sense of what was important. In just this way the very powerlessness of the weak allowed them a means of resistance to the value judgments of the nobles. Their inability to act compelled them to seek and exact “imaginary revenge.”25 This is
not to say that they imagined themselves to have exacted revenge whenever they could not. Rather, where they could not exact revenge “in deed,” they exacted a novel sort of revenge, a “subterranean” (GM III:14) form which proceeded silently and was therefore all the more sinister. There was certainly some self-deception involved. But the revenge operated primarily on an “ideal” or “spiritual” level rather than a factual one.

The noble and the man of ressentiment would agree for the most part on who was who and what had transpired. Those filled with ressentiment retaliated by imagining that precisely the characteristics by which the nobles identified themselves were the undesirable ones, and that they themselves were the virtuous ones: they looked at the same facts “but dyed in another color, interpreted in another manner, seen in another way” (GM I:11). Nietzsche identified priests as being the catalysts for this change; they invented ever more elaborate explanatory schemes to support the “priestly mode of valuation” (GM I:7) and show that the nobles’ characteristics were to be condemned. But the imaginary revenge of ressentiment is first and foremost “an inversion of the value-positing view” (GM I:10). And, claimed Nietzsche, “The slave revolt in morals begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values” (GM I:10).

The oppressed achieved “the ultimate, finest, sublimest triumph of revenge . . . they succeeded in pushing their own misery into the consciences of the fortunate” (GM III:14). The weak were more numerous, and above all more devious than the nobles: necessity had cultivated cunning and deceit in them. The nobles, by contrast, were childish, unreflective, even stupid. Their only talent was cruelty; thus, after the mere insinuation of inverted values, their downfall became inevitable. The nobles themselves came to doubt whether strength and health were in fact worthwhile, and a new type, the priest, became the ideal: the healer who is himself sick (GM III:15), the impotent master.

Nietzsche’s invocation of the so-called slave revolt thus functions primarily as a claim about the impossibility of a way of life regulated entirely by force. The victory of the priestly mode of valuation, claimed Nietzsche, represents the triumph of “cunning” over “violence” (GM
The nobles did not lose power because their strength faltered, but because it became useless when they could no longer make sense of their own authority. The nobles are characterized by perfected instinct \((GM\ I:11)\), and this is their strength: their physical vitality is untempered by self-doubt or self-examination. Without any capacity for reflection, however, they “could never adequately give information about the reasons for their actions”\((BGE\ 191)\). The nobles, as such, needed to maintain a positional status, but at the same time could not articulate what their position should be. Their particular form of anti-social behavior was in fact a form of sociality, one which could not be sustained by the means at their disposal. They were fundamentally incapable of explaining, even to themselves, why they were in charge \((GM\ I:10)\), so precisely because they could not take seriously the challenge presented by the priests \((GM\ I:11)\) they eventually lost their good conscience to administer means of holding on to power.

Nietzsche later insisted that all social institutions manifest some form of violence. In fact, our slavish modern ones are in their own manner the most violent of all. But violence by itself is completely inadequate,\(^30\) and the slave revolt marks its demise. The forces that are still effective today have long been “refined”\((D\ 30)\), “spiritualized”\((AOM\ 276)\), “transfigured”\((BGE\ 229)\), “sublimated”\((HH\ I:137)\), and “transformed”\((GS\ 23)\); the constraints that have a hold on us are not primarily physical.\(^31\) Violence by contrast is “coarse” and “crude,” and Nietzsche referred to those who would rely on it as “retarded”\((HH\ I:614, 633)\), that is, as left behind from another age. The “force of reason”\((D\ 453)\) has turned out to be more powerful: the social conditions on the endurance of some putative authority require that it be to some extent rational. This rationality is not one of efficient means to given ends, and not one of what Nietzsche calls “Begründung”\((D\ 34, BGE\ 186)\), that is, providing a rational foundation for authority. Rather, authority must be rational in that it offers and supports reasons: it can give an account of itself, and provide for some distinction between those reasons that genuinely explain and those that do not. The slaves won because they were able to offer reasons; they could explain that they should be in power and what the source and status of their authority was. The nobles by contrast, strong but sublimely unreflective, always lose \((GM\ I:8)\).
It is in the fifth stage that things start to get interesting. Here transpires the “greatest event in the history of the sick soul” (*GM* III:20): the creation of the “bad conscience.” Nietzsche contended that the slave revolt in morals, this attainment of imaginary revenge, was also defective. The reason for its shortcomings was simple: the successful revolt perhaps alleviated some arbitrary physical abuse, but it did not make anyone happy. Successfully casting blame on an obvious source of suffering did not suffice for finding a satisfactory life. In fact, with everyone’s conscience thereafter “poisoned,” the slave revolt in fact made things worse, in that it made everyone less capable of addressing the reasons behind their enduring dissatisfaction.

According to Nietzsche the weak were directionless without something to react against. But after the slave revolt they had no obvious enemies, so when their dissatisfaction inevitably emerged, it provoked confusion. They consequently sought guidance from the priests, who offered an explanation:

“I suffer: someone must be to blame for it”— thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: “Quite so, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—*you alone are to blame for yourself*!”— This is bold and false enough, but one thing at least is achieved by it . . . the direction of *ressentiment* is altered. (*GM* III:15)

The weak needed an object of blame: striking back was their art of self-preservation. But by this time they had assumed power, so there was no one to turn to but themselves. They directed their hostility against the purported source of their suffering, and tormented themselves. If nothing else they could excoriate themselves for the very success of the slave revolt: self-torture and self-laceration fed off the perpetual shortcomings in their humility. Their *ressentiment* turned against itself, and the “bad conscience” was invented.

Nietzsche claimed that man “invented the bad conscience in order to hurt himself after the *more natural* vent for this desire to hurt had been blocked”(*GM* II:22). One had instinctively sought to assert one’s will by manipulating the environment; loosing one’s energies entailed exerting some control over the world, including over others. But the fear of reprisal restrained
aggressive instincts against others. Fear of the nobles prevented some from manifesting their aggressive instincts at all. The accomplishment of imaginary revenge stopped even the “spiritual” outlet for these instincts; the attainment of revenge left no more room for revenge. Once all of these outlets were gone, the only direction in which to unleash one’s hostility was back toward oneself, as a reprisal: to hold oneself accountable for all for one’s suffering by causing oneself more suffering. This involved, most crudely, literal self-torture, self-flagellation, self-mortification, but much more significantly: aggression against one’s instincts, the repudiation of one’s wants, and hostility toward one’s desires, as well as scourging oneself with doubt, guilt, grief. And it was all precipitated by an “ineluctable disaster” (GM II:17, emphasis added). Sooner or later self-inflicted suffering was bound to become a familiar human habit:

I take the bad conscience as the profound sickness that man was bound to contract under the pressure of the most fundamental of all changes that he ever experienced—that change which occurred when he found himself definitively closed up inside the confines [Bann] of society and of peace. (GM II:16, emphasis added)

Although it emerged out of contingent events, there was nothing arbitrary about the invention of the bad conscience. It was the only possible response to the stress of socialization. Leading a life came to require one to be predictable and sociable, so cruelty was directed back inward until a social animal was the result.

Nietzsche deemed the creation of the bad conscience the most decisive event in the genealogy of morals because of the changes it wrought in human character. According to Nietzsche we cannot look at these changes merely as “organic adaptations” (GM II:17). That is, although the changes were brought about by force of circumstance, they were far more significant than what expedience would have required. Rather than the mechanical effect of a natural process, the creation of the bad conscience marked humanity’s self-separation from nature. Human governance rather than environmental adaptations took over the shaping of human character; for the first time human character was itself taken as an object and made what was willed of it. The new potentials this created were so profound that Nietzsche described the
change as “a leap and a plunge into new situations and new circumstances of existence” (GM II:16). With the bad conscience the story truly starts to be about us: self-determining, even self-inventing persons, rather than just animals who talk. More than self-inflicted suffering for the sake of socialization, the bad conscience was what created the self-distance needed to take oneself as an object. The inwardness thereby established made it possible for us to revise our beliefs, our ends, and even ourselves.

The bad conscience has a profound impact on our world. The animal soul turned against itself, taking sides against itself, was something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and pregnant with a future that with it the aspect of the earth was essentially altered. (GM II:16)

Before the invention of the bad conscience, the world was primarily either hospitable or inhospitable; after, it became profound.

The bad conscience created the self-distance that allowed our behavior to be about something beyond mere survival or immediate impulses. Without this self-estrangement, contended Nietzsche, instinct and behavior were inseparable; it took great, self-inflicted pains to separate circumstance and deed. But once this happened, it led to “ever-new widening of distances within the soul itself” (BGE 257), such that almost anything could be a potential object of our concern. The bad conscience moved the meaning of our activity from immediate wants to whatever we made of it. The creation of memory first extended the range of what our activity could be about: past events such as promises made, long-standing circumstances, and, through the making of plans and the observation of regularities, future events. Religion eventually taught us to “treat concepts with deep respect [Ehrfurcht]” (GS 144), such that wars could be fought over theological differences. Completely abstract concerns with no apparent bearing on anyone’s life could be more important than survival. More and more we came to fight over what is worth fighting about. Now it is our self-understandings—how we interpret who we are and what we do—that is more disputed than any outward circumstances.

Nietzsche understood norms and values in terms of a certain authoritativeness that arose first out of social and political hierarchies. Gradually such authoritativeness came to be less and
less explicitly political until, with the advent of the bad conscience, particular concerns could take on their own “sovereignty of movement” (*BGE* 3). That is, the bad conscience is so important because it occasions the *sui generis* concerns that have become a familiar part of our ethical lives. The most remarkable feature of the history of ethics is, according to Nietzsche, that we have come to take norms and values so seriously. Through the bad conscience certain concerns have come to be seen as bearing completely autonomous authority: irreducible to, for example, prudential considerations or someone’s subjective state, and not necessarily requiring justification in terms of anything else. This not only produces novel sorts of concerns, it also represents the advent of objectivity. By making possible concerns that are important independently of anyone in particular taking them as such, the bad conscience integrated the particularities of subjective concern with the generalities of normative status.

The other significant change wrought by the bad conscience is that, by forcibly driving apart inclination and behavior, it rendered human character and human action a matter of self-determination. The bad conscience thus made it possible for the subject matter of ethics to be how we, although natural beings, could nevertheless come to hold ourselves to self-originating but nevertheless objective standards. Nietzsche insisted that there is nothing given about the force of ethical imperatives or even of rational ones. They are our own inventions, to which we hold ourselves as conditions of being ourselves, or being free. Nietzsche, in other words, extended the tradition of construing ethics in terms of freedom, and in particular, in terms of freedom as autonomy. \(^{33}\) The issue is not escaping from the causal order, but how it is possible to construe a standard of self-determination at all. The character of the constraints and perhaps the manner of their self-imposition permit the distinction between genuine self-origination and mere heteronomy. As long as the integrity of such a distinction is maintained, then a reconciliation of the constructedness and the objectivity of ethics is possible. Of course, this only broaches the question of how we can make such a distinction, and here is where Nietzsche’s position is distinctive. Nietzsche offered perhaps the most radical freedom as autonomy position. For Nietzsche, “man is the not yet determined animal” (*BGE* 62): everything
about us from our ideals to the character of our agency is the product of our continuing efforts at self-creation. Our freedom runs all the way through: it is not merely to act in a particular, free way, but to determine in a free way what the freedom could consist in, and so on. And this, incidentally is why genealogy is needed, rather than a philosophical anthropology or theory of human nature. We have made ourselves into malleable, historical animals, and what is at stake is not the genetic story of how we got here, but the forward-looking issues of how to construe the meaning of our historical inheritance and the character of our self-determination. If we understand ourselves as both historical and free, then genealogy is needed to trace the fruits of our collective labors.

The incredible productiveness that Nietzsche attributed to the bad conscience leads to a central feature of his genealogy, the ubiquity of asceticism. All ethical phenomena of any importance depend upon the self-directed cruelty that the bad conscience represents. The language, not to mention the historical examples invoked, can sometimes be a bit lurid, but the point is basic: a tremendous amount of work had to be done to make ourselves reflective and self-governing, and the impetus to do that work did not come naturally, and did not come exogenously. Nietzsche claimed that we have made ourselves increasingly responsive to and productive of reasons and subtleties of meaning through an accelerating self-discipline. This self-discipline has made us more discriminating with respect to both thought and action. Nietzsche identified “knowledge” as “a form of asceticism”(A 57; cf. GS 305 and BGE 229), in that it involves self-imposed demands that distinguish it from mere belief or impression; similarly, Nietzsche insisted, “Consider whether sacrifice is not present in every action that is done with reflection”(AOM 34). And this self-refinement and the suffering it has involved cannot be considered as something that happened to us, but rather must be seen as we have actively committed ourselves to. Precisely as self-refinement it is something directed: not merely change, but change in a particular direction, so engaging in it amounts to taking on its purposive character. Nietzsche claimed, that is, that the aspirations toward freedom that constitute so much of our ethical life must be seen as both self-imposed and painful — or in
another word, ascetic.

It is critical to note that the ubiquity of asceticism is not the result of a purported natural or metaphysical fact. Nietzsche did not claim that “life is basically suffering”; asceticism held interest for Nietzsche precisely as an “antinatural” will to hurt oneself. Nor was asceticism the consequence of the inherent slavishness of most of humanity. Again, Nietzsche’s genealogical interests were in ethical phenomena as the product of purposive exertion. There is no room for unmediated natural types; even if such things existed, they would have been long-submerged under the product of our self-discipline. “Master morality” is merely “the sign language of what has turned out well” (Epilogue), and lest anyone think that the process reflects a natural hierarchy, Nietzsche insisted that “success has always been the greatest liar” (BGE 269). The ubiquity of asceticism stems merely from the directedness of aspirations toward freedom.

Our attempts at self-determination, according to Nietzsche, have required instilling a sense of purposiveness into our lives, by which we can make sense of what ends and activities are in fact ours. But to see one’s life as purposive requires a sorting out, into the ultimately significant and the purely instrumental, random, or trivial. In order, that is, to see our lives as purposive we must willfully trivialize large parts of them, and the more rigorous our attempts at self-determination, the more of our lives we lay waste to. “Life,” said Nietzsche, “consists of individual rare moments of the highest meaningfulness [Bedeutsamkeit] and countless intervals in which at best the shadow image of these moments float about us” (HH I:586). In dedicating oneself to a purpose, all the training, cultivating, preparing, and sometimes simply waiting are reduced to means, negligible moments which we abide for the sake of something else. Whatever independent worth these moments might have possessed is subordinated to something higher. And as our purposes have grown more complex, we have had to assign more of our lives and even of ourselves to the trivial per se. Now “we all bleed at secret sacrificial altars” (Z:3 “Von alten und neuen Tafeln” 6); by committing ourselves to anything anymore we make ourselves ascetic.

Asceticism was so readily exploited just because it was so mechanical: it was possible to
adopt a routine and achieve an effect. By removing oneself forcibly from the economy of nature one could thereby produce meaning. Pain was something remarkable: as a survival mechanism, a signal for danger, it automatically commanded attention. But it could be introduced arbitrarily into any situation. The original medium for this was others: one directed cruelty against them, and made a spectacle of their pain, as a way of making one’s own activity eventful. But this inevitably failed to suffice. Torture was a crude instrument, and one could inflict only so much pain upon others. It was like trying to impress a stamp upon water: irrespective of the force brought to bear, there was a limit to the effect one could produce. The expressive potential of hurting others turned out to be shallow. But one’s own self proved to be a more convenient and tractable medium. There were new disciplines to impose, complementing a new expanse of effects: not only could one tyrannize over behavior, but also impulses, dispositions, inclinations, and even thoughts. Ascetic practice provided a forceful, public way to manufacture a sense of purposiveness. Public, self-inflicted suffering was a particularly effective means for making it perfectly clear that this is not worth much but something else strange and hidden is worth all the pain, worth far more than what is forsaken. Asceticism made pain transparent and customary, and since self-inflicted pain only made sense as a means, it created the appearance of some goal, even if the appearance was illusory.

Once this asceticism began, claimed Nietzsche, it accelerated. Since “an improvement is invented only by one who can feel that something is not good”(GS 243), we rendered ourselves increasingly discontented in the search for some satisfying sense of purposiveness. Gradually we became more and more “involved, captious, peaked, and tender”(BGE 226). But the result of this process was that self-estranging ideals as such became authoritative. This is the sixth stage of Nietzsche’s genealogy, the ascendance of the ascetic ideal. It was not merely the case that ascetic practice spread. When everything else failed to suffice, one adopted ends precisely because they were self-abnegating. Nietzsche’s claim was that once the search for ethical authority became public and rational, the slide into asceticism was inevitable. He depicted the process as gradually intensifying constraints on what could count as objective.
Self-provoked doubts led to ethical crises, in which familiar ideals came to seem artificial or arbitrary. The response was always to look with greater rigor for something that was immune to such worries. Eventually it came to be seen as a requirement on any putatively authoritative ideal or norm that it be completely estranged from human will. Humankind came to have “faith in a metaphysical value” (GM III:24): the hope of finding something exterior to human practice which could validate it conclusively, from without. Nietzsche deemed this to be a remarkable achievement, in that it became possible to take norms and values as authoritative even when they are completely disconnected from one’s immediate or idiosyncratic purposes. But at the same time it was tremendously destructive:

When one places life’s center of gravity not in life but in the “Beyond,”—in nothingness—one deprives life of its center of gravity altogether. (A 43)

By subscribing to the ascetic ideal, we look to some “Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above” (GS P2) for the reasons that structure our lives. We thereby lose touch with our normal receptivity to reasons, and what sense our lives did have. And in turning over our lives to the “nothingness” where our hopes lie, we harm ourselves.

Although the ascetic ideal has been both destructive and unsatisfying, it has proven itself durable. In fact, claimed Nietzsche, its hold on us grew with the passing of time, because it functioned as an “expedient” (GM III:13). The ascetic ideal solved a problem:

*This* is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a monstrous void—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, “why suffer?” (GM III:28)

The ascetic ideal has been so durable because it was needed: it “offered man meaning” (GM III:28). When no other means were available, it provided a general sense of purposiveness which could structure one’s reasons, one’s ends, and one’s sense of self. The “meaning” thus produced was always unstable, but each time the ascetic ideal began to falter, it managed to perpetuate itself still further. Not only was it expedient, claimed Nietzsche, but it also
functioned as a “closed system of will, goal, and interpretation” (*GM* III:23; cf. also *TI* “Skirmishes” 5).

That is, the ascetic ideal did not merely offer particular norms or ends as authoritative. Rather, it furnished a horizon of sense making, which encompassed not only modes of conduct and reasons, but also motivations and a picture of the world. This set is mutually reinforcing: the picture of the world helps to explain the authority of the norms, and so on. Further, claimed Nietzsche, it is all-encompassing. The ascetic ideal is completely general in scope; it is directed toward the sustaining of purposiveness per se. As such, it is the “‘faute de mieux’ par excellence” (*GM* III:28): not only has it been the sole option for solving the “problem of man’s meaning,” but it coopts or destroys any potential rivals. It can offer an explanation of any possible competition, to show that it is misguided or simply evil. It is immune to any empirical challenge: thanks to the ascetic ideal can we deem it irrelevant whether to not our deepest commitments make us deeply unhappy, or sick, or even incapable of maintaining those very commitments. If it does not work there is something wrong with us. The ascetic ideal “has even declared doubt to be a sin” (*D* 89).

Despite its durability, the ascetic ideal has nonetheless perished, and this brings about the seventh and final stage of Nietzsche’s genealogy, nihilism. According to Nietzsche’s famous analysis of modernity, we have managed to liberate ourselves more and more from constraint, and yet this liberation is accompanied by a profound sadness and insecurity. This is what Nietzsche called nihilism, and identified as our contemporary condition. We have grown too acutely critical, or simply suspicious, to endure any constraints. And yet, thought Nietzsche, our autonomy depends on finding some authoritative direction of commitment; we need some self-imposed constraint as a condition of our freedom. Nietzsche considered nihilism to be the culmination of our ascetic cruelty. After having given up more and more for the sake of finer and finer subtleties, there was nothing left to do but give up everything for the sake of nothing. Now there seems to be nothing to give any point to what little of our asceticism remains, and yet there is nothing else; there is no direction in which to turn.
Nietzsche claimed not only that nihilism is our contemporary condition, but that we have arrived here out of *necessity*. In fact, the entire route that genealogy traces is, according to Nietzsche, a necessary one: there was no decisive turning point, no crucial missteps, no alternate paths. The various invocations of necessity in Nietzsche — eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, tragic fate — are often ignored or given strange metaphysical readings. But the identification of necessity, especially historical necessity, is central to Nietzsche’s philosophical position. He acknowledged that it is contrary to appearances: “Everything in the domain of morality has become variable and volatile, everything is in flux, it is true; but everything is also rushing forward, and toward one goal.”

For all of Nietzsche’s attention to lacunae and contingency within historical processes, the focus of his argument was not in the enumeration of particular observations, but in the discernment of an underlying directionality that has determined the present situation. Historical understanding is dependent on finding just such a necessary course:

> What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now, for necessity itself is at work here. (*KSA* 13:11[411]; cf. also *BGE* 203, *GM* P2 and II:1)

And not only does necessity alone permit understanding in an otherwise chaotic realm, but it renders history of philosophic interest. Identifying where necessity is at work helps to distinguish that which concerns the internal character of our attempts at self-determination from the occurrence of chance events.

Asceticism culminates in nihilism according to a “relentless inner logic”; the necessity involved is ‘internal’ in character. Nietzsche typically discussed the “self-overcoming of morality”(*BGE* 32; cf. D 61) or the “self-contradiction”(*GM* III:11) inherent in the ascetic ideal in making this claim. So the ascetic ideal didn’t just die according to Nietzsche; it killed itself. The basic form of the story is that, certain activities, by their very structure, progress in a way that eventually brings about their own unavailability. In the most familiar form of this claim, the “will to truth” destroyed itself. The ascetic ideal, significantly in the form of Christianity, cultivates truthfulness to such an extent that it becomes necessary to reject Christian faith, and
much else too:

One sees what has really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness taken ever more rigorously, the father confessors’ refinement of the Christian conscience translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price. (*GS* 357; cf. *GM* III:27 and *EH* “Destiny” 3)

In general Nietzsche argued that the very absoluteness of the ascetic ideal made it impossible for it to sustain any concrete allegiance. But the more important form of the argument is the one that runs across the entire genealogy, namely this one. As we have tried to direct ourselves better, this has required self-consciousness, to be able to reflect on what one is doing and how one could be doing better. Once this critical self-scrutiny began, it accelerated, taking on independent authority and quickly becoming destructive. And after undermining all other commitments, it turned to examine itself, and found itself wanting. Thus a self-scrutiny that had become pointless was the final commitment, but now this too is gone. Genealogy thus depicts history as one long enterprise, that of our attempts at self-direction. The story of the genealogy is one of how these attempts were made possible and initiated, but have foundered. And the point of the story is to show that it foundered not because of some accident, but because the very character of the project as pursued was faulty.

IV.

This is the substance of Nietzsche’s philosophical argument: our past attempts at free self-direction are no longer viable. We arrived at the ascetic ideal, and now this, too, has come to an end. And not only has it come to an end, but there was no avoiding it, and no way to have advanced it without contributing to its demise. All of our past commitments have been ascetic, and none of them are possible any more. Nietzsche described ethical commitments as purposive, and the point of genealogy was to show that everything we have tried does not work: not merely that they have not worked but that even on their own implicit terms they are permanent, irremediable, inevitable failures. And they are not merely inevitable failures, but they are inevitable failures because of internal defects that make themselves failures. This is
what Nietzsche needs for his historical account to have normative implications. If the failure of the ascetic ideal were reversible then, obviously, it would remain a viable option; if it were irreversible but transpired in an accidental manner then it would be possible to look on it regretfully as a lost but powerful aspiration. Note that an account of causal genesis would be beside the point here: a genuinely internal critique could not rely on historical accident. The failure at issue must be truly immanent, and for this to be brought to light what is needed is not a veridical story about the past but a functional isomorphism between the genealogical analysis and the character of the ideals being critiqued.

So Nietzsche claimed that the failure was necessary: the ascetic ideal is internally defective in such a way that it causes its own demise. We have no choice but to reject it. Trying to sustain a life guided by the ascetic ideal in any of its forms would be not only painful but futile. It offers us no reason to hold ourselves to any standard and the meanings it assigns to things carry no authority. It provides for no self-understanding in the setting of ends and the making of choices; it gives no sense to the leading of a life.

Raymond Geuss insists to the contrary that “there is nothing ‘necessary’ about any of this”; Hegel had such a view but, “If Nietzsche’s own views really had this structure he would just have relapsed into the kind of German metaphysics of a ‘real, deep structure’ partially hidden behind an apparently different surface which it was one of his major achievements to have rejected.”

Nietzsche, however, very concisely disputed both the lack of necessity and the dissociation (on this matter) from Hegel:

And if this book is pessimistic even into the realm of morality, even to the point of going beyond faith in morality— should it not be for this reason be a very German book? For it does in fact exhibit a contradiction and is not afraid of it: in this book faith in morality is terminated— but why? Out of morality! . . . In us there is accomplished—supposing you want a formula— the self-sublimation [Selbstaufhebung] of morality. (D P4)

Nietzsche’s argument here is, again, that the ascetic ideal, particularly in the form of morality, destroys itself: it promotes a moralized conscience which cannot subscribe to the ascetic ideal. “As the executors of its innermost will”(D P4), we come to reject it; the only way to avoid this
is to avoid ever embracing it. It is part of the character of the ascetic ideal that it eventually turns against itself, and from this stems the necessity of its demise. Or, as Nietzsche asserted in pseudo-Hegelian, because of its “contradiction” it “sublimates itself.” But just as Nietzsche allied his “German book” with Hegel, he denied having lapsed into a two-tiered metaphysics: “We have accustomed ourselves to believe in the existence of two realms, the realm of purposes and will and the realm of chance . . . . The belief in the two realms is a primeval romance and fable . . . ” (D 130).

To have both purposes and chance does not require a magical deep structure; it requires only that we have and find purposes. To do so, of course, we need not postulate a deeper reality behind or underneath the causal surface. Finding purposes and appealing to “psychological” explanations does not invoke another realm; it only demands that we be able to take certain phenomena as meaningful. Nietzsche was not claiming that what was ‘really’ happening was different from what seemed to be happening, but only that when one understood human history in a certain way, one could see that a particular crisis was necessary. This necessity is not the undeviating necessity of mechanism or logic, but that of meaning: it did not imply that nothing could possibly have been otherwise, but that if something were otherwise, it would be not what it is. What is at issue is how one understands the regularities that obtain. Culture, character, and narrative stand like laws over their respective domains: they explain, even serve as reasons. If someone is of a particular culture, or has a particular character, she is not merely very likely to act in certain ways; she acts in certain ways because of who she is. Should she fail to do so, something has gone wrong; one might need to reevaluate who she is. Similarly, if one considers, say, the increasing secularization of Western society, it is hard to see this as a long sequence of repeated, entirely accidental events, as if one might just as likely wake up to a theocracy tomorrow. There is a necessity in this process in that it would take a radical disruption in our self-image for the process to change direction.

So Nietzsche was not claiming that it would contravene the laws of nature or logic if the ascetic ideal were not to destroy itself; such a claim would serve no argumentative purpose in
any case. Nietzsche’s necessity claim was that the process of the destruction of the ascetic ideal was internal, directional, and unrevisable. Something perhaps could have happened to prevent the ascetic ideal from failing: a meteor that ended everything, for example. Nietzsche’s point, however, was that the failure of the ascetic ideal was not akin to something falling from the sky. We would not be persons if we saw our deepest commitments as randomly ordered. Our ideals, in particular, cannot be understood as governed by chance; we like to think that we have something to do with our holding of them. In general, to take phenomena as significant is to see them as stemming from a process governed by mind. When wars begin or markets move, we look for causes, and these causes are not natural ones that compel guns to be fired or sell orders to be executed, but rational ones: rivalries, a need for resources, territorial disputes, the end of a fiscal year. The economic interests that cause a war and the fear of inflation that causes the stock market to go down provide reasons that are sometimes the best, if not the only, available causal explanation; physics and logic, certainly, are not helpful here.

Similarly, genealogy provides an account of the changes that lead up to our ethical commitments in terms of an underlying directionality. Human history is presented as one long, collective enterprise that moves, if a bit haltingly, toward the capacity for self-determination. In such an enterprise, the causes of change are attributed to human will rather than merely to natural contingency; the process is one responsive to and guided by reasons. Accordingly no ancillary factors or special circumstances are needed to explain how it reaches its conclusion, and this is Nietzsche’s necessity claim: all that is needed to explain the ascetic ideal’s demise is the internal character of the historical, self-correcting striving toward some ideal by which to live. This sort of necessity claim is a ubiquitous feature of our self-understanding. The inevitability of liberal trading regimes, the impossibility of peace without a Palestinian state, someone’s destiny for greatness, lovers fated to meet, and the sorry lot of small family-run stores are familiar to us because we understand the underlying processes as in some way directed. What distinguishes Nietzsche’s account from these more common ones, apart from its complexity, is the generality of the issues: the status of ideals and autonomous self-
determination.

Nietzsche allowed that his assessment of things carried no guarantee: “necessity is not a fact, but an interpretation”(KSA 12:9[91]). In fact Nietzsche readily conceded that not only the ascriptions of necessity, but all of his contentions were “interpretive” in character. This did not trouble him: “Supposing that this also is only interpretation— and you will be eager enough to make this objection? . . . Well, so much the better . . .”(BGE 22). He thought that philosophy should be self-consciously offering interpretations, since matters of ethical concern are filled with a “polysemous character”(GS 373). We contend over subtleties that are bound to be underdetermined by any possible neutral description, and just this contentiousness is expressive of the importance that they bear. A demand for conclusiveness, or for something external to human practices that would provide us with a definitive reassurance about their worth, might seem to be a neutral constraint on the critical process. But Nietzsche regarded it as representative of a pathological need for security: not only is it cowardly and slavish, it is ascetic. Nietzsche by contrast, by offering an interpretation in which ethical commitment and reflection are themselves accorded purposive, attempted to avoid the ascetic ideal. And this is Nietzsche’s primary defense for his interpretations: his, alone, are still possible. There is no alternative that does not demand fundamentally ascetic commitments in order to hold it. The ascetic ideal, Nietzsche said, was a “closed system of will, goal, and interpretation”: it involved not only commitments about ends and action, but a comprehensive way of making sense of life. Now that it no can longer effectively serve this function, some other meaning must be given to history, and to ethics.

This of course is a regressive argument: Nietzsche supported his interpretation by means of a conclusion drawn from that interpretation, which is in turn presumably to be supported by further, equally disputable interpretations. Nietzsche readily conceded this, too: “And we, pressed this way, we who have put the same question to ourselves a hundred times, we have found and find no better answer . . . ”(BGE 230). Nietzsche went out of his way to claim that he was not attempting to refute the ascetic ideal: that would be ascetic once again.
Instead, he claimed, “Looking away shall be my only negation” (GS 276). How one understands these matters is ultimately a question of the practical commitments one settles on in pursuing self-direction. Nietzsche claimed to offer practical considerations on how one could go about living, so as to be able to make better sense of one’s life. Further, he contended that the other side is regressive vis-à-vis genealogy:

You say the morality of pity is a higher morality than that of stoicism? Prove it! But note that ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ in morality is not to be measured by a moral yardstick . . . so take your measures from elsewhere. (D 139)

The idea that there could be any conclusive, noninterpretive basis by which to assess either our collective, historical enterprise of self-determination or the value of competing ways of life cannot itself be supported nonregressively.

Nietzsche’s other response to an objection of regressivity is that it must be so; the acuteness of the freedom problem demands it. In the problematic as Nietzsche conceived it, everything falls under the scope of our self-determination: our historical self-understanding, our standards of judgment and of rationality, the norms that we collectively impose on ourselves, the meaning that we attach to particular concerns, the way in which we think of our freedom. Just to characterize ourselves as even potentially spontaneously self-determining when there are other compelling domains of description already requires a confidence that cannot be fully redeemed. In Nietzsche’s radicalization of the post-Kantian linkage of judgment and freedom, how one interprets is inextricable from ethical considerations. With everything thus up for revision, even the character of our freedom, there is no fixed point which could serve definitively to resolve questions of norms, purposiveness, or meaning. What remains for philosophy is to show how authoritative norms could emerge within the context of a way of life that sustains attachment. 

48 It offers prospective considerations on how we might find a life that we can affirm, and perhaps reassurance that we do not go astray in according weight to the
concerns that we take as real, regardless of what their origin might be.\textsuperscript{49}

\footnote{1 Nietzsche often insisted that he does not want to engage traditional philosophical problems on their own
terms, but rather to avoid them while addressing more fundamental problems: for example, “I do not refute ideals, I
merely put on gloves before them”\textit{(EH P3)}. Translations of Nietzsche’s texts are mine unless otherwise noted.}

\footnote{2 One can also respectfully deny that genealogy bears any special significance for Nietzsche. I believe that
this is mistaken, but this option is available in particular to those who claim that each passage or “aphorism” is a
“microcosm,” so that there is no sustained account of any kind (e.g., Walter Kaufmann), and those who claim that
Nietzsche’s arguments are governed by straightforward philosophical considerations, so that genealogy at most
illustrates points made elsewhere in a clearer, more general fashion (e.g., Maudemarie Clark, John Wilcox).}

\footnote{3 David Couzens Hoy in “Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method” (in Richard Schacht, ed.,
\textit{Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality}, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), offers an explicitly Humean
reading: “Nietzschean genealogy is like British genealogy in being a form of what Hume called ‘experimental
reasoning,’ formulating hypotheses about what causes could have led to given effects. . .”\textit{(252)}. Arthur Danto
seems to have not Hume’s “experimental” project in mind, but rather his “painterly” one mentioned in the first
section of the \textit{Enquiry} of depicting virtues in the appropriate light: “Naturally, if you can influence someone to use
a moral predicate in \textit{your} way, you can also get him to modify, if not himself, then at least his conception of

Morality} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 429: “It is this kind of preparatory “knowledge” that his
genealogical inquiries are intended to provide . . .”}

\footnote{5 Brian Leiter, \textit{Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Nietzsche on Morality}, New York: Routledge, 2002.}


\footnote{7 Raymond Geuss, \textit{Morality, Culture, and History} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13: “It
will be contingent which wills encounter and try to ‘interpret’/master Christianity at what times and under what
circumstances, and it will be contingent how much force, energy, and success they will have in imposing their}
‘meaning.’” Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 107f: “The genealogy of moral institutions is an interpretation that aims to show that they too, like all other institutions, exhibit the contingent, complicated, and even motley character discussed in the previous chapter.”


9 This is one theme, among many others that arise here, of Paul S. Loeb’s “Is There a Genetic Fallacy in Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals?”, in *International Studies in Philosophy* 27 (1995): 125–41.


18 The *History* essay (*HL*) has some affinities with genealogy, and already in *HH* we can find not only genealogical observations, but also general reflections on what might be considered genealogical method: cf. *HH* I:1, *HH* I, chapter 2 (“On the history of the moral sensations”), *HH* I:20 (“the historical justification . . . and the
psychological”), HH I:450, AOM 223, and WS 189. Similar reflections appear at D 95, GS 1, GS 7, GS 335, BGE chapter 5 (“Natural history of morals”), BGE 186, GS P2, and GS 345.

19 See especially D 44: “The more insight we possess into an origin the less significant does the origin appear . . . .”

20 See BGE 186: “. . . to arrange vast realm of subtle feelings of value and differences of value which are alive, grow, beget, and perish . . . .”

21 See, for example, Nietzsche, GS P2.


23 That Nietzsche had just such a function in mind explains, I think, why before settling on “genealogy” Nietzsche invoked the natural sciences to characterize his project: chemistry (HH I:1), physics (GS 335), natural history (BGE, chapter 5), and physiology (D 453).

24 GM intersects with itself, for example, at II:11 with the discussion of ressentiment and the bad conscience, and at II:17 with the discussion of “blond beasts,” ideals, and the bad conscience. And GM intersects with Nietzsche’s other texts as well: D is quoted at length in GM III:27, BGE is frequently referred to, GM offers itself, on the title page, as a “supplement and clarification” of BGE, and GM is itself quoted in NCW.

25 The word that Nietzsche used here was not “eingebildet” or “phantastisch” but “imaginäre,” which Nietzsche often (for example, GS 92, and GM II:2, II:18) used to suggest creativity rather than illusion.


27 For a discussion of the self-deception involved in such revenge, see the reference to “clouding one’s own memory” in BGE 40.


29 One finds a similar point, that no state has the resources to generate compliance exclusively by coercive means, in H.L.A. Hart, The Concept of Law (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), 21.
On the inadequacy of force without reflection, see for example *HH* I:245 and I:452, *D* 534, and *TI* “Morality” 1 and “Germans” 1.

Nietzsche claimed in fact that even in the case of the nobles, it was “strength of soul” rather than “physical strength” on which they relied for their authority; cf. *BGE* 257.

One might be more precise than Nietzsche here and follow Geuss in saying “urbanization”: i.e., the issue is not how persons lived in proximity without trying to kill each other (as perhaps in the earlier stages), but how they lived together in conditions of mutual interdependence; cf. Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.


Stanley Rosen, citing the last section of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (IV:20), comments upon “the strikingly Hegelian nature of this rejection of happiness in favor of work”; Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 204.


A view that masters and slaves are natural kinds (and that most persons are slaves) is often attributed to Nietzsche; for one example see Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), especially 155–161.

Compare Peter Railton’s remarks about the “tension between autonomy and non-alienation” in “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” in *Consequentialism and its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), 108. Even gaining control over one’s life, as he says, requires some self-estrangement. Of course, identifying “alienation” rather than “asceticism” as the relevant issue places his remarks in the left-Hegelian tradition, which differs from Nietzsche’s account in a number of important respects.

See Nietzsche *BGE* 51: “The sight of the saint arouses a suspicion in them: such an enormity of denial, of antinature, would not be desired for nothing. Could there be a reason for it, a tremendous danger, knowledge of which the ascetic . . . might have special access to?”

40 *HH* I:107; see also Tracy Strong’s interesting discussion of “becoming” and “necessity” in Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 278–9.


42 Daniel Conway has also offered a view of genealogy as providing an “internal” or “immanent” critique of morality, for example in “Nietzsche’s Internal Critique of Foundationalism,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 19(1987): 103–110, and in “Genealogy and Critical Method,” in Richard Schacht, ed. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). Conway’s interpretations differ significantly from mine, however. The former paper presents genealogy as attempting a theoretical refutation of morality in terms of “the internal incoherence of foundationalism”(104); my claim is not that Nietzsche refutes anything, but that he aims to show that ideals are functional failures. The latter paper’s interpretation of genealogy differs from mine in three main respects: genealogy’s internal critique, according to Conway, incorporates a “naturalistic reduction of morality”(321); genealogy is a concession to “epistemic restrictions”(319); and genealogy has an “enabling”(324) function that is distinct from the critique itself. I have been insisting, by constrast, that genealogy does not merely enable but constitutes the critique, and that it offers not a “reduction” but a naturalistic account of the emergence of the distinctly anti-natural. Also, I do not see how immanent critique is compatible with a naturalistic reduction, which would seem to offer a consideration extrinsic to ideals. The first two of the above differences do not seem to be present, however, in Daniel Conway, “Writing in Blood: On the Prejudices of Genealogy,” *Epoché* 3(1995): 149–81.


44 The enterprise is only retrospectively recognizable as such, but Nietzsche identifies it all the same: “If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process . . . then we discover that the ripest fruit is the sovereign individual . . . .”(*GM* II:2).

As Joshua Cohen points out in “Arc of the Moral Universe,” one does not need “deep” metaphysical commitments to make arguments about the “necessary” demise of certain social institutions: in Enlightenment theories of history the injustice of certain social arrangements was related to their lack of viability; see Joshua Cohen, “Arc of the Moral Universe,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1997): 93.

Nietzsche in describing his argumentation also used tropes of circularity: for example, “self-propelled wheel”(Z:1 “Vom Wege des Schaffenden”), and “widest circle”(Z:3 “Von alten und neuen Tafeln” 19).

Cf. Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche’s Conscience: Six Character Studies from the Genealogy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8: “... to suggest what possibilities for maturity and enlightenment await us...” so that we may see what we might become...”

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**WORKS CITED**


