Nietzsche’s Critique of Morality and the Creation of Values

Posted on October 10, 2019

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/nietzsches-critique-of-morality-and-the-creation-of-values/

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche is often described as a philosopher who rejected morality, but his project is more precise. He investigates where moral values come from, what psychological needs they satisfy, and what kinds of human character they encourage. In works such as *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche questions inherited distinctions between good and evil and asks whether conventional morality can suppress creativity, strength, intellectual honesty, and self-development. His concepts of master morality, slave morality, ressentiment, the herd, the last man, and the higher type are not a simple classification dividing humanity into superior and inferior people. They are tools for diagnosing different ways of valuing. Nietzsche’s alternative is not unrestricted selfishness. He repeatedly emphasizes discipline, self-mastery, endurance, and the difficult task of creating values one can genuinely affirm. His philosophy remains ethically controversial because of its elitist language and its criticism of equality, but its enduring challenge is to make people responsible for examining rather than merely inheriting the standards by which they live (Leiter, 2002).

Genealogy, Master Morality, and Slave Morality

Nietzsche’s genealogical method asks how concepts such as “good,” “evil,” “guilt,” and “conscience” developed historically rather than assuming they have timeless meanings. In his account, master morality begins with self-affirmation. Powerful or noble groups call qualities such as strength, courage, generosity, pride, and independence “good,” while describing what they regard as ordinary or weak as “bad.” Slave morality begins from a different psychological position. People unable to express hostility directly may reinterpret their powerlessness through ressentiment, defining the powerful as “evil” and themselves as “good” because they are patient, humble, or harmless (Nietzsche, 1998). Nietzsche does not prove that all morality arose from one historical event, and his genealogy should not be treated as modern empirical history. Its purpose is diagnostic. It asks whether a moral system grows from affirmation or reaction and whether it expands human capacities or converts resentment into universal law. The distinction therefore concerns modes of evaluation rather than a permanent division between specific social classes.

The Ascetic Ideal and the Critique of Christianity

Nietzsche treats Christianity as one of the most powerful historical forms of what he calls the ascetic ideal. He is particularly critical of interpretations that make natural desire a source of guilt, turn suffering into moral proof, or place the true value of life in another world. The ascetic ideal gives pain a meaning: suffering can be understood as punishment, purification, sacrifice, or preparation for salvation. Nietzsche acknowledges that such meaning can prevent despair, but he argues that it may preserve life by teaching people to distrust the body, instinct, sexuality, pride, and worldly joy. His critique should not be converted into the claim that every Christian individual is weak or that every religious practice denies life. His broader target includes secular systems that reproduce the same structure of self-denial after belief in God declines. Nietzsche is interested in the psychological effect of values. A morality becomes suspect when it treats human vitality itself as a problem to be eliminated rather than something to be educated, disciplined, and transformed into creative activity (Nietzsche, 1998, 2005).

The Herd, the Last Man, and Conformity

The “herd” metaphor describes social pressures that reward similarity, security, obedience, and mutual reassurance. Nietzsche worries that communities can treat unusual ambition or demanding forms of excellence as threats simply because they disturb accepted standards. Herd behavior is not limited to the numerical majority; it can appear within intellectual circles, political factions, or groups that think of themselves as rebellious. The important question is whether a person has examined a belief or borrowed it because agreement provides safety. The “last man” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* extends this criticism into a cultural warning. The last man values comfort, health, entertainment, and avoidance of risk but no longer believes that anything deserves profound commitment. Nietzsche does not praise suffering for its own sake. He fears a society in which convenience becomes the highest value and people reduce their aspirations until nothing demanding can disturb them. The last man therefore represents comfortable nihilism: life continues pleasantly after the ability to create serious goals has disappeared (Nietzsche, 2006).

Self-Overcoming and the Higher Type

Nietzsche’s higher type should not be confused with a wealthy ruler, a person of a particular race, or someone entitled to exploit others. The qualities he values include independence, creativity, endurance, self-discipline, intellectual courage, and the ability to give form to competing drives. Self-overcoming is central because the self is not treated as a finished essence. It is a changing organization of habits, desires, memories, interpretations, and commitments. To overcome oneself is to identify a current form of life as inadequate and transform it through demanding practice. This can involve abandoning resentment, learning a craft, accepting an uncomfortable truth, disciplining

desire, or converting conflict into artistic or intellectual work. Value creation is therefore not arbitrary preference. A person who simply follows every impulse remains governed by those impulses. Nietzschean freedom requires the capacity to organize one's drives around demanding purposes that can withstand criticism and experience. The creator of values must also accept responsibility because no inherited rule can guarantee that a new standard is innocent or wise (Nietzsche, 2002, 2006).

Perspectivism, Compassion, and Ethical Risk

Nietzsche's perspectivism is sometimes mistaken for the claim that every opinion is equally true. He instead argues that knowledge is always approached from particular embodied, historical, and linguistic perspectives. Some perspectives can nevertheless be broader, more informed, more disciplined, and more capable of incorporating objections than others. This insight encourages moral inquiry into whose interests a value serves and what behavior it produces. Nietzsche's treatment of compassion is similarly more complicated than simple cruelty. He criticizes pity when it multiplies suffering, creates dependency, or allows the helper to feel morally superior. He does not require indifference to pain. A contemporary reader can preserve his question—does assistance increase another person's agency?—without accepting victim-blaming or abandoning social protections. Nietzsche's language of rank, breeding, and strength also carries genuine ethical risk and was later misused by racial and fascist ideologies. He opposed anti-Semitism and German nationalism, but his anti-egalitarianism remains controversial. Creative independence must therefore be distinguished from domination or denial of another person's dignity.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's critique of morality is best understood as a project of revaluation rather than a command to live without values. Genealogy exposes how moral concepts can arise from power, fear, resentment, guilt, and social need; the distinction between master and slave morality contrasts self-affirming and reactive forms of valuation; and the ascetic ideal reveals how suffering can be given meaning by turning desire against itself. Nietzsche then warns that herd conformity and the comfortable nihilism of the last man may reduce the capacity for difficult aspiration. His alternative centers on disciplined self-overcoming, intellectual honesty, and the creation of values for which an individual is prepared to take responsibility. This vision does not provide a safe political program, and its elitist elements deserve criticism. Its philosophical importance lies instead in the pressure it places on inherited certainty. Nietzsche asks readers to investigate not only whether a value is socially approved but what history produced it, what psychological pattern sustains it, and whether living by it increases or diminishes the capacity to create, judge, and affirm one's life.

References

Nietzsche, F. (1998). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Hackett.
Nietzsche, F. (2002). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cambridge University Press.
Nietzsche, F. (2005). *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Cambridge University Press.
Nietzsche, F. (2006). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge University Press.
Leiter, B. (2002). *Nietzsche on Morality*. Routledge.