

Nietzsche's Critique of Morality and the Creation of Values

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Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche is often described as an enemy of morality, but that description is incomplete. He does not simply tell readers to abandon every value and pursue selfish desire. Instead, he investigates the historical and psychological origins of moral concepts, asks whose interests they serve, and criticizes forms of morality that deny life, punish excellence, or convert weakness into a universal standard. The original essay captures Nietzsche's suspicion of conformity and his concern that exceptional individuals may be reduced to obedient members of a "herd." However, it oversimplifies Christianity, treats Nietzsche's categories as a rigid classification of all human beings, and attributes an unsupported quotation to "Karl Marx." A more accurate analysis must distinguish master and slave morality, explain resentment and the ascetic ideal, clarify the role of the higher type and the "last man," and recognize that Nietzsche's project is not the destruction of value but the revaluation and creation of values through disciplined self-overcoming (Leiter, 2002; Nietzsche, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2006).

Nietzsche's Genealogical Method

Nietzsche's critique of morality is genealogical. Rather than assuming that words such as "good," "evil," "guilt," and "conscience" possess timeless meanings, he asks how they developed through conflict, social hierarchy, religion, punishment, memory, and psychological need. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he presents moral systems as historical achievements rather than revelations existing outside human life. This method challenges the idea that conventional morality is neutral. A value may appear universal because its history has been forgotten. Genealogy therefore examines who benefited from a moral interpretation, which instincts it encouraged or suppressed, and what kind of person it sought to produce. Nietzsche's historical sketches are provocative rather than modern social-scientific histories, and they should not be treated as literal accounts of one event that created morality. Their purpose is diagnostic: to make inherited values questionable enough that readers can evaluate their effects (Nietzsche, 1998; Leiter, 2002).

Master Morality

Nietzsche uses "master morality" to describe a mode of valuation associated with socially powerful, confident, and self-affirming people. In this scheme, "good" originally names qualities such as

strength, courage, generosity, pride, beauty, and the ability to act. The noble type begins from an affirmative judgment about itself and then describes what is common, timid, or dependent as “bad.” “Bad” in this contrast does not initially mean demonic or morally wicked; it means lower, ordinary, or lacking distinction. Nietzsche admires the affirmative structure of this valuation because it creates from a sense of abundance rather than from resentment. Yet his account is not a simple endorsement of historical aristocracies. Political elites can be decadent, cowardly, or dependent on inherited privilege. The “noble” individual in Nietzsche’s philosophical sense is better understood as someone capable of giving form to life, accepting responsibility, and creating values rather than merely repeating them (Nietzsche, 1998; Leiter, 2002).

Slave Morality and Ressentiment

Slave morality begins differently. Nietzsche argues that people unable to express hostility directly may turn injury inward and transform resentment into a moral judgment. Through ressentiment, the powerful become “evil,” while the powerless describe themselves as “good” because they are humble, patient, obedient, or harmless. This reversal provides psychological dignity to people who lack external power. Nietzsche does not deny that the weak may genuinely suffer under domination, nor does he claim that cruelty is admirable. His criticism concerns the moment when reactive hatred becomes a universal moral system that condemns vitality itself. Ressentiment does not merely oppose a particular oppressor; it may teach people to distrust strength, pleasure, ambition, distinction, and creative independence wherever they appear. The danger is a morality defined primarily by negation—“I am good because I am not like them”—rather than by the positive creation of a way of life (Nietzsche, 1998; Leiter, 2002).

Christianity and the Ascetic Ideal

Nietzsche treats Christianity as a major historical vehicle of slave morality and the ascetic ideal, but his critique should not be reduced to the claim that every Christian is weak or that all Christian conduct is harmful. He is interested in doctrines and practices that assign guilt to natural desire, elevate suffering into proof of virtue, promise compensation beyond earthly life, and interpret obedience as moral superiority. The ascetic ideal gives suffering a meaning: pain becomes punishment, purification, sacrifice, or preparation for another world. Nietzsche recognizes that this meaning can prevent despair; his objection is that it may preserve life by turning life against itself. The individual survives while learning to distrust the body, instinct, sexuality, pride, and worldly joy. Christianity is therefore important in his analysis because it organizes guilt and hope into a durable moral psychology. Yet his broader target includes secular ideals that retain the same structure of self-denial even after belief in God declines (Nietzsche, 1998, 2005).

“Anti-Natural” Morality

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche criticizes morality that attacks the “passions at their roots.” He calls such morality anti-natural because it treats instinct itself as the enemy rather than asking how an instinct can be educated, redirected, sublimated, or integrated into a richer life. This does not mean that every impulse should be acted upon. Nietzsche repeatedly values discipline, style, rank ordering, and the ability to command oneself. A person ruled by immediate appetite is not free in his sense. Freedom requires forming one’s drives into a coherent pattern. The difference lies between suppressing desire because it is inherently sinful and transforming desire into creative energy. Aggression may become intellectual courage; erotic energy may become art; ambition may become demanding work. Self-mastery is not the elimination of instinct but the organization of competing forces into a life one can affirm (Nietzsche, 2005; Leiter, 2002).

The Herd and Conformity

Nietzsche’s “herd” metaphor refers to social pressures that reward safety, similarity, obedience, and mutual reassurance. Herd morality can protect vulnerable people and make social cooperation possible, but Nietzsche fears that it can become hostile to every demanding or unusual form of life. Institutions may praise mediocrity as fairness, confuse comfort with happiness, and treat difference as a threat. The original essay turns the herd into a fixed population of pitiful people, which misses the psychological point. Herd tendencies can appear in anyone, including intellectuals, political leaders, and supposed rebels. A person may oppose one convention while seeking approval from a different group. Nietzsche’s concern is not simply numerical majority. It is the desire to avoid responsibility by borrowing one’s values from the crowd. His criticism challenges readers to ask whether their convictions result from honest examination or from fear of isolation (Nietzsche, 2002, 2006; Leiter, 2002).

The Last Man

The “last man” appears in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a figure of comfortable nihilism. The last man avoids danger, greatness, deep suffering, and ambitious creation. He values health, entertainment, security, and small pleasures but no longer believes that anything deserves profound commitment. Nietzsche does not object to comfort because pain is automatically superior. He objects when comfort becomes the highest standard and removes the possibility of striving. The last man is satisfied precisely because he has reduced his desires. He does not confront the loss of larger values; he celebrates it as practicality. This figure is relevant to modern consumer culture, but it should not be used as an insult for ordinary people. It is a warning about a civilization that can provide convenience while losing the capacity to ask what human excellence might mean (Nietzsche, 2006).

The Higher Type

Nietzsche's "higher type" is not simply a wealthy ruler, physically powerful man, or person entitled to exploit others. Higher individuals are marked by independence, creativity, endurance, intellectual honesty, self-discipline, and the ability to convert conflict into form. They may need solitude because original evaluation is difficult under constant social pressure. Solitude, however, is not proof of greatness. It can also conceal fear or resentment. Nietzsche's higher person accepts demanding tasks and does not measure every action by immediate reward. The original essay is right to associate this type with long-term creation, but it wrongly assumes that the higher person is necessarily devoted to "benefitting others" in a conventional altruistic sense. Nietzsche does not define excellence through self-sacrifice. A creator may benefit future people indirectly through art, knowledge, institutions, or examples of courage, but the work is guided by an internal standard rather than by a desire for popular approval (Nietzsche, 2002, 2006; Leiter, 2002).

Self-Overcoming and the Creation of Values

Self-overcoming is central to Nietzsche's alternative to inherited morality. The self is not a finished substance that simply expresses its authentic desires. It is a changing organization of drives, habits, memories, interpretations, and commitments. To overcome oneself is to recognize a current form as insufficient and transform it through practice. This may involve abandoning resentment, developing intellectual rigor, accepting painful truth, learning a craft, or reshaping one's response to suffering. Value creation is therefore not the arbitrary declaration that anything one wants is good. A value proves itself through the kind of life it organizes and the strength required to sustain it. Nietzsche's creator must test values through experience and be willing to revise them. The task is more demanding than obedience because no external rule guarantees innocence (Nietzsche, 2006; Leiter, 2002).

Perspectivism and Moral Knowledge

Nietzsche's perspectivism is sometimes interpreted as the claim that every opinion is equally true. That interpretation is mistaken. He argues that knowledge occurs from perspectives shaped by interests, bodies, languages, and histories. No observer possesses a view from nowhere. Some perspectives are nevertheless broader, more disciplined, better informed, and more capable of incorporating objections than others. In morality, perspectivism means that a value should be examined from several angles: whose experience it reflects, what behavior it encourages, what it excludes, and what consequences it produces. Nietzsche criticizes philosophers who present personal preferences as universal rational truths. He does not prohibit judgment. On the contrary, he demands more rigorous judgment because inherited categories cannot be accepted without diagnosis (Nietzsche, 1998, 2002; Leiter, 2002).

Does Nietzsche Reject Compassion?

Nietzsche frequently criticizes pity, especially when it multiplies suffering, preserves helplessness, or allows the compassionate person to feel morally superior. His position is not that people should be indifferent to pain. He distinguishes responses that strengthen another person from those that make weakness permanent. Genuine generosity in his work can arise from abundance rather than guilt. A strong person may give without turning the recipient into a debtor or using aid as evidence of virtue. This remains ethically controversial because social suffering is not always overcome through individual strength, and institutions must protect people from avoidable harm. Nietzsche's challenge is useful when it asks whether assistance increases agency, but it becomes dangerous if used to dismiss disability, poverty, illness, or oppression as personal failure. His critique requires ethical resistance to victim-blaming (Nietzsche, 1998; Leiter, 2002).

Political Misuse and Ethical Risks

Nietzsche's language of rank, breeding, strength, and higher types has been politically misused, including by fascist and racial ideologues. His writings contain anti-egalitarian and elitist elements that should not be erased. At the same time, he opposed German nationalism, anti-Semitism, mass politics, and the state worship later associated with Nazism. His concept of the higher individual cannot responsibly be converted into a biological race or a license for authoritarian rule. The ethical risk remains that admirers may use "self-creation" to justify domination or contempt. Any contemporary use of Nietzsche should therefore separate criticism of conformity from dehumanization. Creativity does not require denying another person's dignity, and intellectual independence does not grant immunity from consequences. Nietzsche is most valuable as a critic of hidden motives and moral complacency, not as a provider of a political program (Nietzsche, 2002, 2005; Leiter, 2002).

Is Morality "the Danger of Dangers"?

Nietzsche's provocative question asks whether morality itself could endanger human development. The danger arises when one moral interpretation presents itself as unquestionable and prevents experimentation with forms of excellence. Moral rules can protect people from violence and exploitation, but they can also preserve resentment, demand conformity, or make guilt a permanent condition. The correct conclusion is not that morality as such must disappear. Human beings inevitably evaluate actions and ways of life. Nietzsche's project is to expose the cost of particular values and ask whether they promote flourishing, honesty, creativity, and strength. His critique is strongest against moral absolutism and weakest when it underestimates the need for shared protections. A society devoted only to exceptional creators could excuse abuse; a society devoted only to safety could suppress achievement. The unresolved tension is part of the importance of his

work (Nietzsche, 1998, 2002; Leiter, 2002).

Conclusion

Nietzsche's philosophy of morality is a critique of inherited valuation, not a simple command to become selfish or cruel. Through genealogy, he traces how master morality, slave morality, resentment, guilt, and the ascetic ideal produce different kinds of people. He worries that herd conformity and the comfort of the last man may make creativity, courage, and long-term aspiration appear dangerous. His higher type responds through discipline, self-overcoming, and the creation of values that can be affirmed rather than obeyed out of fear. Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity is historically broad and sometimes unfair, and his elitist language carries serious ethical risks. Nevertheless, his central challenge remains powerful: values should be examined by their origins, psychological effects, and capacity to shape life. The aim is not to live without standards, but to become responsible for the standards one inherits, rejects, and creates (Leiter, 2002; Nietzsche, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2006).

References

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