

Is nietzschean
genealogy an
effective form of
critique?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What is Nietzschean genealogy ? Is it an effective form of critique?

Nietzschean genealogy is novel because, unlike methods employed by other moral philosophers, it does not try to present an argument in defence of morality. For instance, John Stuart Mill claims that morality is justified on utilitarian grounds, whilst, for Immanuel Kant, moral values are the inevitable product of human rationality. Friedrich Nietzsche, though, rejects such claims and proposes that moral values are often taken for granted without serious scrutiny. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche elucidates this view by way of a historical account of the development of morality. In the three comprising essays, Nietzsche employs various genealogical methods to challenge the status of morality; some of which I will explore in this essay. First, though, I will explore an example of Nietzschean genealogy at work; namely Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt. I will then demonstrate how Nietzsche applies his 'antirealist' and 'naturalist' approaches to the historical study of morality (Leiter, 2014); in doing so, I will also call upon Michel Foucault's (1977) ideas of 'descent' and 'emergence'. Ultimately, I will argue that Nietzschean genealogy is an effective form of critique as, by challenging assumptions about morality, it offers the foundation for a robust interrogation of moral values.

The essays of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* each give a historical account of how certain moral values have taken shape over time. The opening essay, "Good and Evil", 'Good and Bad', for instance, describes a phenomenon which Nietzsche (2006) refers to as the 'slaves' revolt in morality' (p. 20). According to this account, slaves develop a negative feeling – or 'ressentiment' – toward their 'noble' masters and eventually rebel

<https://assignbuster.com/is-nietzschean-genealogy-an-effective-form-of-critique/>

against their oppression (ibid.). This rebellion, Nietzsche argues, causes the inversion of 'noble morality' and, in turn, 'gives birth to values' (ibid.). In other words, noble masters are considered by slaves to be 'evil' as a result of their immoral behaviour, whilst by contrast, slaves consider themselves 'good' for living with their oppression (ibid., p. 22). As Clark (1994) sums up, once the masters 'can be *blamed* for what they are, they can be thought deserving of punishment' and the slaves will 'convince themselves that they really are superior' (p. 25). This is an example, then, of how Nietzschean genealogy attempts to explain that certain moral values have their origins in the slaves' revolt. This is a simplified account of Nietzsche's 'First essay'; however, it still serves to highlight some of the key ideas present within his work.

The ideas of 'antirealism' and 'naturalism' are central to Nietzschean genealogy (Leiter, 2014). Given the focus here is on morality, Nietzsche's antirealist approach refers specifically to his assertion that there are no universal moral truths. As Leiter observes, Nietzsche holds that 'moral facts don't figure in the "best explanation" of experience, and so are not real constituents of the objective world'; any ideas about morality, therefore, can be 'explained away' (ibid., p. 120). Nietzsche does not necessarily suggest that there is no such thing as an objective truth, however, he argues that attempts to apply the same moral framework to every person and situation are ill-conceived.

This rejection of universal moral facts is emphasised by Nietzsche's naturalist approach to moral philosophy. According to Leiter (2014), the notion of naturalism refers to 'a *methodological* view about how one should

<https://assignbuster.com/is-nietzschean-genealogy-an-effective-form-of-critique/>

do philosophy' in which any understanding of philosophical concepts ' should be continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences' (p. 2). To similar effect, however with specific reference to moral values, in *Beyond Good and Evil* , Nietzsche (2001) asserts that ' There are absolutely no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena' (p. 64). Similarly, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (1974) states that ' Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature – nature is always valueless, but has been *given* value at some time' (p. 242). In other words, it is impossible to know whether something has certain moral qualities by simply observing it; thus, any perceived moral properties are merely a product of the observer's moral convictions. The formation of an individual's moral beliefs, according to Nietzsche, is best explained by the idea of naturalism. Every person is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, including the social conditions under which they have lived. To explain why people have assigned certain moral properties to certain objects and phenomena, then, as Leiter (2014) summarises, Nietzsche believes that ' one needn't appeal to the existence of objective moral facts' and that, rather, ' psycho-physical facts' are a more adequate place to begin an investigation (p. 120).

This naturalist approach to understanding how moral beliefs are formed is clearly observable in the aforementioned ' First essay' of *On the Genealogy of Morality* . The slaves believed themselves to be ' good' for accepting their subordination at the hands of the ' evil' masters. Had the slaves been stronger and capable of physically overthrowing their masters, however, their value judgements would surely have been very different. Indeed, it is arguably the very fact that slaves are unable to overthrow their masters

which likely causes them to develop a feeling of *ressentiment*. In this instance, then, the slaves' ideas of 'good' and 'evil' are necessarily products of 'psycho-physical facts' – and not universal moral truths.

Nevertheless, to understand Nietzsche's naturalist approach in its totality, it is also necessary to have an appreciation of the manner in which value judgements develop over time to form systems of morality. Foucault (1977) insists that two concepts, in particular, are key to gaining such an appreciation: 'descent' and 'emergence'. According to Foucault, genealogy 'opposes itself to the search for "origins"' (ibid., p. 140). In other words, because moral values do not have singular origins, genealogy rather attempts to trace how certain values develop over time. Furthermore, he argues that genealogy gives social factors primacy, defining his notion of descent as 'the ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by the bonds of blood, tradition, or social class' (ibid., p. 145). Genealogy, then, for Foucault, is to trace 'the minute deviations . . . that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us' (ibid., p. 146). According to this reasoning, by tracing the multiplicity of historical social influences that shape people's moral values, it is possible to decipher more about the development of morality over time.

The second of Foucault's (1977) concepts, emergence, or 'the moment of arising' (p. 148), argues that moral values are, in part, a result of power struggles between certain forces over time. Foucault characterises emergence as 'the endlessly repeated play of dominations', during which 'the domination of certain types of men over others leads to the differentiation of values' and 'class domination generates the idea of liberty'

<https://assignbuster.com/is-nietzschean-genealogy-an-effective-form-of-critique/>

(ibid., p. 150). Therefore, emergence describes an ongoing process, throughout history, whereby certain forces compete to assert their dominance over other forces. Over time, depending on which forces are dominant at that moment, moral beliefs and value systems are established.

Each of these concepts, descent and emergence, have an important part to play in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* in describing the status of moral values throughout history. In this respect, I believe that Nietzschean genealogy successfully recognises the extent to which moral values have been – and continue to be – contingent upon a wide variety of social factors. The history of humankind proves that the evolution of moral attitudes and beliefs is inextricably linked to social change. Owing to all of these factors which shape values over time, attempting to explain the history of morality is clearly a complicated undertaking, requiring a full inquiry into many different areas of study. However, I believe that Nietzschean genealogy has played a valuable role in illuminating these complexities, whilst also demonstrating what could be gained from a robust critique of morality – for which Nietzsche's work can ably serve as a framework.

In conclusion, I have shown that Nietzschean genealogy employs a variety of analytical methods in order to scrutinise assumptions about morality and that, ultimately, it is an effective form of critique as it enables Nietzsche to successfully present a framework for a robust interrogation of morality.

References

- Clark, M. (1994) 'Nietzsche's Immoralism and the Concept of Morality', in R. Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on*

Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals '. London: University of California Press, pp. 15-34.

- Foucault, M. (1977) ' Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* . New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 139-164.
- Leiter, B. (2014) *Nietzsche on Morality*. London: Routledge.
- Nietzsche, F. (1974) *The Gay Science* . New York: Random House.
- Nietzsche, F. (2001) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2006) *On the Genealogy of Morality* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.