

The reactive nietzsche: contradictions in the genealogy of morals

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



In his *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche censures the members of the Judeo-Christian tradition for their "impotence." As a result of their impotence the descendents of this tradition (slaves, as I will call them to maintain some modicum of political correctness), have developed a hatred "to monstrous and uncanny proportions" (33). This hatred has had the end result of squelching the happiness and will to power (two truly laudable elements of humanity) that a truly strong individual might otherwise develop. While Nietzsche touches upon positive aspects of what he would like to see in the world in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he spends the majority of the work destructing the tradition that he views as having taken over the world. Nietzsche takes issue with two primary aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition: its reactivity rather than creativity, and its celebration of suffering rather than joyful activity. He takes issue with both because they display a passivity that attacks rather than creates. Both allow humans to dwell on things that are not natural human impulses, and avoid willful creative activity. The great contradiction of the work is that in its expression Nietzsche shows a propensity for the same behavior he condemns. His entire work is a reactive, pessimistic attack on the western tradition (a tradition he feels prey to). This contradictory expression brings his own philosophy under the axe that he has built, but first it demonstrates the way that suffering and reactivity are the natural human impulses he says they are not. Nietzsche explains that the Judeo-Christian values system can be explained in terms of the weakness of its followers. During their developmental periods both Jewish and Christian cultures were enslaved cultures. As these philosophies were developed by people in slavery they came to be philosophies that in

some way accepted slavery as part of the human condition and celebrated it. In celebrating their own condition, Nietzsche says the slaves came to believe, " he is good who does not outrage, who harms nobody, who does not attack, who does not requite, who leaves revenge to God, who keeps himself hidden as we do" (46). The notion of being hidden in this philosophy is very important for Nietzsche for it suggests the way these people avoided constructive behavior. Instead they celebrated their suffering and developed a " will to self-tormenting," to venerate the slavery that was unfortunately and unnaturally a part of their condition. The slaves are thus like the aesthetic philosopher Nietzsche similarly disdains, who " affirms his existence and only his existence, and this perhaps to the point at which he not far from harboring the impious wish: Let the world perish, but let there be philosophy, the philosopher, me!" (108 translated from the latin). Like the aesthetic philosopher, in the celebration of their own existence the slaves celebrate negative values that would have the world perish, or at the very best, abstain from all good human behavior. A noble morality celebrates " vigorous, free, joyful activity" (33), but Nietzsche says the slaves say No to this philosophy: " slave morality from the outset says No to what is {outside,' what is {different,' what is {not itself'; and this No is its creative deed" (36). This pessimistic rejection grows out of the " hostile external world" of the slave." The slave's reaction cannot be creative but rather is " fundamentally reactive" (37). Because they are always saying no, the slaves can never partake in any true creative deed. They can only destroy, and their first instinct is to destroy the master: " he has conceived {the evil enemy,' {the Evil One,' and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as

an afterthought and pendant, a [good one]himself” (39). The primary aspect of the good in the slave morality is the suffering that is endemic to this condition; this Nietzsche says, is not something to be celebrated. Nietzsche insists that the human reverence for suffering, and the reactionary aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition should not be taken to be natural human impulses just because they are expressed in the dominant system. Speaking of the causality of history he says, “ 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” (77). His skepticism of the values system of the modern world is the impetus behind the historical nature of his genealogy. In this genealogy he believes that central place of suffering and the reactionary attitude of the western tradition are derived from essentially artificial conditions. Because the slave was forced into hiding, the slave developed a mode of battle that Nietzsche refers to as “ cleverness” (39). The word is used in a very derogatory sense to refer to self-interested sophisticated arguing and scheming rather than an honest consideration of human impulse. More significantly, the very values of the Judeo-Christian tradition evolved only as a result of the artificial creditor-debtor relationship. This relationship taught man that he owed something to everyone who had given him anything, including one’s ancestors. The debt to one’s ancestors is fundamentally unpayable because they are dead, and as a result one develops a tremendous sense of guilt, which one only knows how to correct through suffering, as one would for a creditor. Christianity is the apex of this philosophy for it heightens the sense of guilt and thus the demand for suffering in the individual. The sense of guilt imposed by the Christian

system is thus derived artificially from an unnatural human condition)the creditor-debtor relationship. So far this discussion has revolved around what Nietzsche has found at fault in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is because the Genealogy of Morals is primarily a reaction to the Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than a discussion of his own, positive philosophy. He has occasionally spoken about a positive morality, mentioning the “ vigorous, free, joyful activity” (33), but this was primarily as a means for attacking the hatred he sees at the core of the Judeo-Christian tradition. On a larger scale Nietzsche does try to allow positivity to dominate. He begins the book by defining “ good,” but this discussion quickly appears to be little more than an introduction to his derisive discussion of “ evil” in Judeo-Christian culture. The second essay is titled with the concepts of “ guilt” and “ bad conscience,” while the third essay is titled, “ What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals.” Both of these titles indicate matters that Nietzsche proceeds to attack. This attack mode is, of course, just what Nietzsche censures the Judeo-Christian tradition for in his discussion. He bemoans their “ weary pessimistic glance, mistrust of the riddle of life, the icy No of disgust with life” (67). Most of all he abhors this No because it is fundamentally reactive rather than creative. But the entire Genealogy is an extended No, that makes little pause for mentioning anything new. Each of the accusations of reactivity that Nietzsche poses against the Jews seems to be a description of his own activity, or lack thereof. He says, “ to be incapable of taking one’s enemies, one’s accidents, even one’s misdeeds seriously for very long)that is the sign of strong, full natures” (39). Nietzsche himself seems very capable of taking his enemies)who he labels as “ ill-constituted, dwarfed, atrophied,

and poisoned" (43) very seriously. Seriously enough to devote an entire book to them. This would seem to implicitly categorize him as missing a "strong, full nature." In his very reactivity he displays his own propensity for suffering. He explains that "every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent . . . some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy; for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, anaesthesia" (127). The living agent Nietzsche chooses is clearly the Jew, and the affect he displays in condemning this agent is apparent everywhere. In one particularly emotional moment, Nietzsche says he can barely bear to witness the tradition he is in the midst of, "but today one no longer has ears for this!" (93). This dwelling on the problems with western culture leads him to a pessimistic suffering in the conditions of his society. He speaks frequently about the disgust for man that the Judeo-Christian tradition engenders, but his own disgust is even more visible. The weak person, he has said, succumbs to his suffering rather than breaking out into creative activity and it is just this weak propensity that Nietzsche displays in his work. Nietzsche does say that we should separate an artist from what he is saying: "one does best to separate an artist from his work, not taking him as seriously as his work" (100). We might extend this to say that even if an artist or philosopher does contradict himself in the expression of his ideas, that does not mean that the ideas themselves should be devalued. The first problem with this approach to the contradictions apparent in Nietzsche is that Nietzsche himself asks us to be wary of people who dwell on reactionary activity. He explains that "every

noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, [while] slave morality from the outset says No to what is [outside,] what is [different,] what is [not itself]" (36). At least in this work, Nietzsche could not label his morality a triumphant one, as it in no way affirms itself, but instead spends its energy destroying, or saying no to what is not Nietzsche's morality. Certainly we might say another of Nietzsche's work focuses more on the positive aspects of his philosophy, but the Genealogy of Morals stands as a testament to his tendency to the behavior which he says marks someone's values as part of a " slave morality." More importantly, in the suffering and reactionary impulse that surfaces through his expression, we are provided with a case study for the way suffering and reactivity are not merely a cause of the creditor-debtor relationship. Nietzsche's suffering arises through an eternal discontent with the world. Nietzsche does not address the possibility that it is just this discontent that Christianity hopes to salve rather than venerate. He doesn't consider the notion that everyone suffers with a discontent of the world, and that everyone wishes the world could be a more perfect place just like him)that there will never be any totally joyful übermensch. As a result, he does not consider that his own universal discontent, rather than some masochistic desire to see others suffer, might be the true reason behind Christianity's unwillingness to ignore suffering as he would wish. His own work, and the pessimistic suffering apparent there, lends credence to the very opposite of his argument: that suffering is universal rather than a calculation of the meek.