

# Tracing the origin of morality "morality"

Experience, Human Nature



Friedrich Nietzsche's "The Genealogy of Morals" and Sigmund Freud's "Civilization and its Discontents," have similar goals. Both men want to expose what they see as the impediments of society on the freedom of the individual. Both attack and condemn organized religion as a disguise for the helplessness that individuals feel in the face of society, and as an historically destructive force that has divorced men from their knowledge of their true selves and renders them impotent in their present lives. Both essays, at their core, struggle with the concept of morality, how it came to exist in society and how it came to govern our present. While the present is the subject of both essays, Nietzsche and Freud necessarily delve into the past of both society and the individual to explain their disparate definitions of morality and what these interpretations mean for their contemporaries. While Nietzsche sees morality as a concept developed by society, Freud instead sees morality as a natural process existing in the individual before he joins society, and in human relations before civilization. Nietzsche sees the past as an explanation for the continuing development of morality, whereas Freud sees the past as a direct continuum from the original existence of morality. Nietzsche does not believe that the origin of any past can be discovered from the present, or indeed that the origin itself exists in its pure form. In fact, his goal in "The Genealogy of Morals" is to counter the belief that moral values such as good and evil existed before men constructed them. He declares: everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically interpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions; all processes in the organic world are processes of reinterpretation; in the course of which the earlier meaning and purpose are necessarily either obscured or lost. No

matter how well we understand [any aspect of the self or society] we do not thereby understand anything of its origin" (Nietzsche, 209). The present, either individual or societal, is then simply a reinterpretation of the past that is the reinterpretation of another past. Whether discussing personal memory or communal or national history, the past that we see is nothing more than a present day interpretation, and no matter how far back we look all we see are past interpretations. Freud, on the other hand, believes that the origin of any present state, not only exists permanently within each of us but that it remains in its pure form within our minds. Using the example of the ancient city of Rome in, " Civilization and its Discontents," Freud asserts that if the history of ancient Rome worked like the human memory, one would be able to see not simply the ruins of restorations, but the original buildings intact as they were in their original incarnation (Freud, 18). While he digresses somewhat when talking specifically about human memory, Freud comments that " it is rather the rule than the exception for the past to be preserved in mental life," not simply as a reinterpretation, but in its original form (Freud, 20). Thus while both men agree that the morality we find in ourselves is a reaction to our natural instinct to be aggressive, to dominate both nature and other men, Nietzsche sees this morality entirely as a societal construct whereas Freud believes it can be traced to a distinct origin both within an individual and historically. Nietzsche believes that what we think of today as morality, is in fact a constant struggle by weak men to inhibit the aggressiveness and power of stronger men. He asserts that morality took shape in society when " slaves," or those not in the top of the social hierarchy, realized that in order to valorize their own weakness they had to

denote the strong as "bad." He notes that in earlier societies the "wellborn" were happy in their lives, while the common elements of society were not: "the 'wellborn' did not have to construct their happiness factitiously by looking at their enemies" (Nietzsche, 172). These noblemen were comfortable in their own lives and did not need any external principles to facilitate this happiness. Further, the cruelty they exhibited to those lower than themselves was part and parcel of being stronger. Nietzsche uses the example of birds and lambs to illustrate the "natural" state of this societal relationship that existed without moral construct. He posits that just because lambs do not enjoy being destroyed by birds of prey, does not make these birds bad: "to expect that strength will not manifest itself as strength is every bit as absurd as to expect that weakness will manifest itself as strength" (Nietzsche, 178). However, unlike lambs and birds, humans have the ability to use their intellect to divorce this natural state from itself, to reinterpret strength as evil and weakness as good: "they assume the right of calling the bird of prey to account for being a bird of prey. We can hear the oppressed, downtrodden, violated whispering among themselves with the wily vengeance of the impotent, 'Let us be unlike those evil ones. Let us be good'" (Nietzsche, 179). Thus, to Nietzsche, the "morality" which rules society and is imbued in every individual is nothing more than a reinterpretation of social relationships by the weak so that they might conquer the strong. The trappings of morality: altruism, guilt at wrongdoing, and punishment to inflict guilt are simply tools developed by the weak of an early age to gain power over the strong that have managed to disguise themselves since as the only way for a society to exist. However, society existed before these moral

constructs were formed. Freud completely disagrees with the notion that morality is a social construct without innate origin. He believes that the development of civilization is modeled on the development of an individual which can in turn be traced back to a morality which existed before society codified it. Like Nietzsche, Freud believes that our natural instinct is to be aggressive. However, unlike Nietzsche, he also sees in the development of an individual the conflicting interests of aggressiveness and the need for love. Freud believes that the fear of a loss of love from the father instinctually curbs a baby's aggressiveness: " his aggressiveness is introjected, internalized" (Freud, 84). A baby learns that anything that will stop his father from protecting him is bad: " at the beginning, therefore, what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with a loss of love" (Freud, 85). Thus, the moral oppositions of good and bad are in fact established in the individual in infancy, they are innate responses to the need for love and the instinct to aggression. Furthermore, once internalized, the mind or " ego" develops an internal authority or " super ego" which instructs the ego as to what acts are good and what acts are bad. Freud, unlike Nietzsche, believes that concepts of morality both exist within each of us as a natural reaction to our instinct of aggression, and also existed historically before society developed. He believes that the moral notions of personal guilt or remorse come from the " primordial ambivalence of feeling toward the father." At some distinct time before society formed, primal sons in fact allowed their aggressive hatred for their father to override their love, they in fact killed him: " after their hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love came to the fore in their remorse for the deed" (Freud,

95). Thus, the guilt or remorse that individuals feel regardless of whether they have actually committed a bad act or simply consider doing it, is the internalized guilt that resulted from this original following of the aggressive instinct. Freud sees throughout the past the reification of this original act and the guilt that came with it. The morality imposed by society in the form of punishment is simply a mimesis of the self-punishment inflicted by the super ego when the ego desires to be aggressive. The effect that this original act of aggressiveness had on individuals who existed pre-civilization has the exact same effect on those living within society and thus we naturally incorporate these notions of morality into society. Nietzsche, however, believes that the natural instinct of man is to be cruel, to be aggressive, and that personal remorse, or societal punishment are simply the instruments of the weak to divorce the strong from their natural inclinations. The connection between aggression and punishment are societal constructs, not natural states. In fact, this connection can be directly traced to the relationship of creditor/debtor in the same way that the notions of good and evil can be traced to the relationship of strong and weak. He believes that before morality was constructed, it was the distinct pleasure of the creditor to extract pain as repayment of debt. Given our natural tendency to aggression: "to make someone suffer was an extreme pleasure" (Nietzsche, 197). Thus, there was a direct economic relationship between material gain and suffering. The same relationship between punishment and pleasure then could be applied to an offense against the community, or a crime. Nietzsche asserts that before "justice" existed as a system of laws it existed as a direct reaction to the amount of suffering caused. In other words, if someone

were to steal money from another, that person would have the right not only to get his money back, but to gain in pleasure from punishing the guilty. But since morality was created by the weak, and the debtor is necessarily weaker than the creditor, the laws which govern post-morally constructed society ignored this natural relationship of pleasure in pain and protected the debtor or criminal from his creditors or accusers: " justice, which began by setting a price on everything and making everyone strictly accountable, ends by blinking at the defaulter and letting him go scot free" (Nietzsche, 205). The " moral" concepts of guilt and punishment were constructed by the same societal relations which constructed the moral concepts of good and bad. While it seems that Nietzsche has a far more pessimistic interpretation of individuals than Freud, his theory in fact develops into a far more positive view of the ability of a person to wrench himself from historical misunderstandings. Since morality itself is a construct of society aimed at divorcing man from his relationship to his own nature, we have the ability to break free from both historical and societal chains and reestablish the freedom we as individuals had before society constructed morality. In " The Genealogy of Morals" this possibility manifests itself as an incredibly classist (and racist) appeal to the strong or " noble" to reclaim their instincts, it can also be seen on a larger scale as the belief that we have agency in the present that no amount of history can erase. On the other hand, Freud's belief that morality existed before society and exists in each individual before they connect to society imprisons us in a never-ending cycle of inactivity. If we cannot revise our image of the past or conceive that past individuals had any agency in the way they acted, then we cannot possibly

hope to revolutionize our own lives. While Freud claims that happiness is what we all seek, he does not seem to be able to find a search for happiness that discovers its treasure. If we can never make up for the original sin of our primordial fathers then we can never be free of guilt or pain. And if the past is simply a direct line from the origin of morality to the present, we cannot possibly use history to better the present or strive for the future.