

# Nietzsche's morality: false principles and premises

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



In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche advocates skepticism and rejection of many traditional beliefs and values. This dismissal of commonly accepted societal norms is evident in his attack on morality and virtue in section 21 of the book. In this section, Nietzsche argues that the motives of morality stand in opposition to the principles of morality. In Nietzsche's mind, the virtues that make up morality — virtues like industriousness, selflessness, and obedience — are self-destructive and accepted as virtuous for their utility to society rather than their benefit to an individual. Although Nietzsche's argument is logical, I believe his argument depends on two false premises and therefore do not accept his view of morality. Nietzsche begins his argument in section 21 by arguing that the praise of virtues by society as a whole has always been “far from selfless and unegotistic” (92). He argues that the virtues that make up modern morality are harmful to individuals who embrace such virtues, yet they are praised by society because society benefits from them. For example, one praises industrious individuals even though “they harm their eyesight or the spontaneity of their spirit” (92) through their hard work because society benefits from their labor. Nietzsche goes on to argue that society would honor and praise a youth who “works himself into the ground” (92) because “the loss of even the best individual is a small sacrifice” (92) to society as a whole. When society mourns the loss of the youth, it does so not for the youth's own sake but because it lost a “devoted instrument to the common good” (92). Nietzsche argues that when an individual steadfastly follows a “real, whole virtue” — like selflessness or industriousness — he or she is a “victim” to that virtue (92). Those who advocate these virtues to their neighbors thus do so out of selfishness: it is

virtues like selflessness and industriousness that bring them the greatest good. Nietzsche asserts that virtue thus cannot be praised for its benefit to an individual. Rather, virtue is praised for “ the instrumental nature” it has in society and the “ unreason in virtue that leads [an individual] to be transformed into a mere function of the whole” (93). He sees the praise of a virtue and its complete acceptance as grave threats to individuality. If man steadfastly follows what society deems as moral and virtuous, Nietzsche argues that he “ deprives [himself] of his noblest selfishness and the strength for the highest autonomy” (93). By being selfless, man ceases to be an individual and becomes a cog in the societal machine. Nietzsche does recognize that some virtues may indeed appear to lead to private advantage. For example, he admits that blindly raging industriousness can lead to wealth and honors, but he argues this truth fails to recognize the “ extreme dangers” (93) that such industriousness poses to the individual. Industriousness “ deprives the organs of their subtlety” (93), making the enjoyment of wealth and riches impossible. Furthermore, Nietzsche points out that, despite the fact that humans live in the most industrious of all times, humans have yet to find anything to do with their acquired wealth other than acquire more wealth. He thus argues that the promises of virtues and morality are not worth the costs they impose upon individuality and happiness. Nevertheless, society will attempt to educate man such that he is conditioned “ by various attractions and advantages” (93) into adopting society's morality at his own ultimate disadvantage. Nietzsche contends that, if an individual listens to this education and adopts society's morality, every virtue of an individual is “ a public utility but a private disadvantage”

(94). Here the opposition between the motives of morality and the principle of morality develops. Society advocates morality on the basis of the principle that if an individual follows the virtues of morality, then he or she will acquire wealth, honor, and happiness. The principle behind morality is thus what is good for the individual. However, Nietzsche contends that the real motivation behind morality is not based on what is good for the individual. Virtues like industriousness and selflessness are harmful to the individual but maximize gains for society. The motives behind morality are thus what are good for society. Nietzsche continues this argument in sections 116 and 117. He argues that morality is a "herd instinct" (174). In Nietzsche's view, whenever one encounters morality, one also encounters "valuations and orders of rank of human impulses and actions" (174). Nietzsche argues that these valuations are "based on the needs of a community and herd" and are subsequently considered the "first standard for the value of all individuals" (174). In other words, whatever benefits the collective herd most is automatically held out to be what benefits the individual the most. Nietzsche argues that this approach to morality is a vestige of the herd mentality that dominated human existence for "the longest and most remote periods of the human past" (175). To be alone or to be an individual was considered a sentence and not freedom. "The idea of free will," Nietzsche argues, was "very closely associated with bad conscience" (175). Nietzsche also argues that during this long period of time, the sting of conscience was not felt when an individual felt he himself did something immoral but rather felt by an individual when he did something that harmed the herd, "regardless of whether the individual had wanted it or not" (175). Although Nietzsche

believes that today one feels responsible “ only for one’s will and actions” (175), Nietzsche argues that modern morality remains a herd instinct of the past that is opposed to individuality and what is good for the individual. Nietzsche makes a compelling and logical argument that the motives of morality stand in opposition to the principles of morality. He shows through several examples how many of the virtues that make up morality are motivated by what is good for society instead of what is good for the individual. However, I believe Nietzsche’s argument depends on two false premises. First, he suggests that when an individual embraces a real, whole virtue, he becomes a victim of the virtue and is violently dominated by the virtue. Nietzsche dismisses the idea of balance or moderation in virtue and morality. Second, he picks and chooses the virtues he castigates, emphasizing those that benefit society while ignoring others that are primarily good for the individual and come at the cost or rejection of society. The first false premise in Nietzsche’s argument is his claim that when one embraces a virtue, it will ultimately “ dominate [him or her] violently and covetously” (92). Nietzsche accepts as a given when advancing his argument that when an individual embraces a virtue he must “ wish to have it in its most brutal form” (196). With this premise, he does show how a virtue can destroy a man only to the benefit of society. However, he immediately dismisses the idea of balance in virtue. It is this balance that I believe is critical to understanding morality. Nietzsche sees the virtue of industriousness as something that dominates a man who embraces it. But can the man who embraces industriousness not balance that virtue with the virtues of family and love? Can he not see the value in hard work and also

the value in spending some time away from work to raise his children and love his family? In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle advances the idea that balance in virtue is key to living a moral and ethical life. Aristotle argues that all true virtue is the “mean” between two extremes. Virtue, Aristotle argues, can be easily destroyed by either deficiency or excess. In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he uses the example of bravery to illustrate his point. When determining what the virtue of bravery is, one can look at the extreme of running away and thus being a coward or the opposite extreme of fearing nothing and thus being rash. The virtue of bravery is thus the balance between these two extremes. Aristotle uses this logic to define several virtues. These virtues include the virtue of temperance as the mean between the excess of profligacy and the deficiency of insensibility, the virtue of liberality as the mean between the excess of wastefulness and the deficiency of stinginess, and the virtue of the right amount of ambition as the mean between the excess of overambitiousness and the deficiency of a lack of ambition. Applying Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to Nietzsche's argument in *The Gay Science*, one can see how the virtues Nietzsche defines as destructive to the individual Aristotle would define as virtues destroyed by excess. A man who embraces the virtue of industriousness to the point that he works himself into the ground would be an example of the excessiveness in virtue that Aristotle argues against. Aristotle would see such an example as the excess of over-industriousness that must be balanced with the deficiency of laziness to achieve the mean of the right amount of industriousness. Aristotle's argument for balance in morality refutes Nietzsche's premise that when an individual embraces a virtue it dominates

him or her and “resists the efforts of reason to keep it in balance” (92). The second false premise in Nietzsche's argument is that he emphasizes virtues that exalt society over the individual while ignoring a number of others that come at the expense or rejection of society yet are nevertheless considered virtues for their positive benefit to the individual. For example, one of the virtues our society holds dearest is the virtue of the “rugged individual” — the man who pulls himself up by his own bootstraps, rejects society, and makes a good life for himself. This virtue places an extreme emphasis on the power of the individual at the expense of the rejection of society and thus cannot be argued to expend the individual to the benefit of society.

Furthermore, this virtue directly contradicts the herd instinct in modern morality that concerned Nietzsche. A second example of a virtue that positively affects the individual and comes at the expense of society is the virtue of reflection. Our society places value in time away from work to reflect and relax. Companies are required to give employees time off from work, priests and doctors are encouraged to take sabbaticals, and the raging industriousness that Nietzsche describes is looked down on in our society as unhealthy and antisocial. Nietzsche would argue that these two premises are not false. First, he would argue that the idea of balance or moderation in virtue and morality is impossible if a man is truly embracing a virtue. Second, Nietzsche would reject the value of the rugged individual and society's acceptance of reflection as a virtue. In both cases, however, I believe his rebuttals would be unconvincing. Nietzsche does not directly respond to Aristotle's view of morality in *The Gay Science* but does indirectly reject the idea of balance in virtue. Nietzsche argues that when one accepts

a virtue, the virtue will ultimately dominate the individual “violently and covetously” (92). He suggests that when an individual embraces a virtue he is unable to prevent that virtue from taking him over, despite his or her “efforts of reason” (92) to keep the virtue in balance. This idea forms Nietzsche's contention that an individual who embraces a whole virtue is a victim to that virtue. However, Nietzsche provides little rationale for why a virtue must necessarily take over a man. Instead, he accepts this idea as the starting point for the rest of his argument against morality. Nietzsche would also reject the rugged individual as a true virtue. In his work *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he indirectly argues against the rugged individual as he viciously attacks democracy. Nietzsche rejects the democratic movement as “the collective degeneration of man” (*Morals* 112) and an example of slave morality that sought to make everyone equal and thus make everyone slaves. The idea of the rugged individual is so central to the democratic movement that Nietzsche would use his arguments against democracy to reject the virtue of the rugged individual. However, I disagree that democracy is a slave morality and thus disagree with Nietzsche's critique of rugged individualism. Although democracy is a form of collectivism, democracy enables the individual to directly participate in government. It is this direct participation in government that I believe frees an individual to drive the collective herd instead of being driven by it. For example, in democracy an individual can run for office and vote in elections. When an individual votes or takes office, he or she influences the direction of society and thus asserts his or her individuality within the herd. Individuals living under fascist or authoritarian governments do not have this ability. Although



Nietzsche would reject the virtue of the rugged individual, he would embrace the virtue of reflection. He consistently argues for the value of reflection in his work. However, he would disagree that society has embraced reflection as a virtue. In section 6 of *The Gay Science*, he laments the “loss of dignity” of reflection and how “an old-style wise man would [now] be considered intolerable” (81). Furthermore, in section 329 he comments how individuals are now “ashamed of resting, and prolonged reflection almost gives people a bad conscience” (259). Although Nietzsche makes interesting points, I disagree that society has lost all sense of value in reflection. Some may argue that the rise of the Internet and our society's obsession with technology threatens reflection. However, the fact that people argue for this fact suggests that our society values reflection and is concerned that people do not reflect enough. Nietzsche's argument that the motives of morality stand in opposition to the principles of morality is a fascinating contention that completely contradicts the traditional view of morality. Nietzsche shows how an individual who embraces a virtue can become victim to the virtue and thus embrace a morality that is harmful to him or her but good for society. Although the logic behind this argument is undeniable, I believe Nietzsche's argument fails on two premises. First, virtue is not something that can or should be embraced violently or covetously. Rather, it is a balance between deficiency and excess, a golden mean between two dangerous extremes. Secondly, Nietzsche chooses virtues that benefit society and neglects a number of virtues that come at the expense or rejection of society. It is because of these two false premises that I do not accept Nietzsche's view of morality and instead find Aristotle's view more

convincing. Bibliography1. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. 6th. New York City, NY: Random House, 1974. Print. 2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. 1st. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print. 3. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1st. London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869. Print.