

Nietzsche: a bundle of contradictions



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In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche details the shortcomings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. He focuses on the fact that the followers of this tradition have developed in such a way that impedes happiness and the normal will power of a strong individual. While Nietzsche mentions some positive aspects of what he would like to see in the world in *Genealogy of Morals*, he focuses on attacking what currently dominates the world: Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche finds problems with two major aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition: its reactivity rather than creativity, and its celebration of suffering rather than joyful activity. His problem is that both actions attack as opposed to create, and cause humans to dwell on negativity rather than take part in creative activity. Nietzsche's ideas are innovative and deserving of great respect, but while condemning this tradition, he himself seems to show the same behavior of which he disapproves. Nietzsche's work itself is reactive, negative, and follows the same patterns of the Judeo-Christian tradition that he is rebuking. This contradiction not only brings his ideas into question, but also indicates that suffering and reactivity are fundamental aspects of human nature, which he says are not. Nietzsche first establishes the origins of Judeo-Christian values. Both Jewish and Christian cultures were enslaved during the part of their history when values were being determined. The philosophies accepted slavery as part of the human condition because the people developing it were slaves themselves. Unfortunately, they also celebrated this captivity. Nietzsche says that by celebrating their condition, the slaves began 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" (Nietzsche 46). The idea of being hidden suggests that these people avoided

doing any activities that would make them stand out, hence any kind of constructive activity to further their cultures. They instead celebrated their suffering and cultivated a “will to self-tormenting” that admired and helped continue their enslaved condition. These cultures, which developed a “slave morality,” continue to focus only on their own current existence and fail to progress at all. When celebrating their own existence, the slave cultures celebrate negative values that adversely affect the world, or at least make no progress. In Nietzsche’s opinion, morality should celebrate “vigorous, free, joyful activity” (33), but he says the slaves refuse 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). Therefore, the actions of the slaves are basically rejections of the outside world. They are not creative, but instead reactive to negative impulses. They destroy what is put before them, and celebrate their torment. As concepts evolved, the primary aspect of the concept of “good” in slave morality became their own suffering, and that is not worthy of being celebrated. Nietzsche argues that reverence for suffering, and the reactionary elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition should not be regarded as part of human nature simply because they are part of the dominant system of values. Nietzsche tries to prove that human nature may be the origin of an idea, but its eventual use is very different from its origin. 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). Nietzsche continues to argue that the major aspects, suffering and reactionary attitude, of the dominant western tradition come from artificial conditions. As discussed earlier, the slave tradition went into hiding, and developed “cleverness” (39) according to Nietzsche. He uses the

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word clever to refer to self-interested arguing and scheming rather than an honest analysis of human influences. However, Nietzsche seems to be using this same method of argument in his pursuit to devalue Judeo-Christian values. Nietzsche undermines the entire system by insisting that it is based on an artificial creditor-debtor relationship. This relationship dictates that man must owe something to everyone who has given him anything, including ancestors. However, the debtor cannot owe anything back to a dead ancestor, and therefore develops guilt, which manifests itself as suffering. This is Nietzsche's explanation for why Christianity inherently increases guilt and therefore suffering in an individual. He points out, though, that any sense of guilt felt by the individual on account of the Christian values system is based on an unnatural human condition: the creditor-debtor relationship. This would lead one to believe that guilt and suffering and also reactivity originate from this source, and are not inherent in human nature. The preceding paragraphs described what Nietzsche finds wrong in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* is essentially a reaction to the Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than a discussion of his own, positive philosophy. He mentions a positive morality, including the "vigorous, free, joyful activity" (33), but he uses this primarily to attack the hatred he sees at the center of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Overall, Nietzsche does try to allow positivism to dominate. He starts the book by exploring the term "good," but this serves only as an introduction to the discussion of "evil" in Judeo-Christian culture. The second essay includes the concepts of guilt and bad conscience, of which Nietzsche attacks. The contradiction of his writing lies not in his actual argument but in the way that he goes about making the point. Nietzsche exhibits the same

type of attacks that he accuses the Judeo-Christian tradition of in his discussion. He complains of their “weary pessimistic glance, mistrust of the riddle of life, the icy No of disgust with life” (67). As stated before, he despises the No attitude because it is reactive rather than creative. However, his entire Genealogy is of the No attitude that makes very little reference to anything new. The accusations of reactivity that Nietzsche levels against western culture could also be made against him. 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, however, does not live up to his own high hopes of a strong nature. He takes his enemies very seriously, considering he wrote an entire book devoted to them. This seems to indicate that either Nietzsche himself lacks what he considers a “strong, full nature” or he is wrong about the nature of strong individuals. Nietzsche also displays suffering through his reactivity. He believes that “every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent...upon which he can vent his affects...for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief” (127). Nietzsche must be a sufferer because he chooses the Judeo-Christian culture as an agent upon which to vent his affects. His focus on problems with western culture leads him to a pessimistic suffering by his own definition. He refers to the disgust for man the Judeo-Christian tradition bears, but his own disgust is also prominent in his writing. A weak person, he says, falls victim to his suffering rather than breaking out in creative activity, yet this is the weakness that Nietzsche displays in his work. Perhaps Nietzsche must be reactive to what he finds oppressive. It may not be possible to make his points through any other method. The ideology is still

valid and he makes good points about the evolution of the Judeo-Christian culture. However, Nietzsche warns his readers of people who dwell on reactionary activity. In these essays, Nietzsche is unable to label his own work triumphant. He dwells too much on negating and saying No to whatever is not his morality. His essays in *Genealogy of Morals* show a tendency to behave in a manner in which he claims to be the essence of a “slave morality.” This is telling of certain facets of human nature. Nietzsche says that suffering and a reactionary attitude are not natural elements of human nature. However, even Nietzsche, who of all people should be aware of his actions, seems to exhibit those two traits in the same writing in which he condemns them. Suffering and reactivity are, according to him, a result of a creditor-debtor relationship. Even Nietzsche suffers, though, and if not from this creditor-debtor relationship, his suffering must arise from a different origin, perhaps a discontent with the world. However, if he can attribute this to his own suffering, he should accept that Christianity may have the same discontent. He overlooks the idea that everyone suffers from a discontent with the world, and everyone wishes it were a more perfect place. He seems to ignore the possibility that a universal discontent, the same he experiences, could be the true reason that Christianity embraces suffering. Nietzsche is a very influential writer, whose ideas were far advanced for his times. However, his own work seems to support the opposite of what he argues: that suffering is universal rather than a problem of the weak.