

Presentation on Treatise III of *Genealogy of Morality*
PHIL 449, Jan 2014

An overarching theme in Treatise III: How the slave values became an ideal, internalized as a way of living, giving meaning to one's life.

-- moving from ascetic practice to ascetic ideals

Ascetic practices vs. ascetic ideals

Ascetic practices: self-discipline, self-control of certain aspects of life in order to be able to achieve something

Ascetic ideals: using ascetic practices to transcend yourself, this life, aim at some other realm; ascetism becomes an entire way of life

Philosophers

Ascetic practices allow philosophers to exist

-- involves having an analytical, critical approach

-- ascetic practices are not necessarily negative; they can be useful, for Nietzsche

Ascetic priests

Ascetic ideals justify their entire existence

-- involves self-negation; locate meaning and value in another world because they don't have much in this world; the only meaning to life is grounded in that other world

-- the *ressentiment* of the slaves towards the nobles is dangerous; could lead them to revolt

-- priests turn the slaves' *ressentiment* against themselves: you are to blame for your suffering

-- by doing so they also give a meaning to the slaves' suffering: a punishment for sin

Perspectivism & science

Moving meaning and value to another realm means denying your perspective, your personality

-- deny value of interpretations, move towards objective truth and transcendental values, universals and unconditionals

perspectivism

-- need to have a reason to want truth—part of one's perspective in aiming at knowledge. So not completely objective or perspectiveless

-- scientific method claims we should eliminate all perspectives; doesn't recognize itself as including a particular perspective

-- science doesn't question the value of objective truth, but just relies on it as an assumption

-- science is self-justifying: if one asks, "why do science?," the reply is "because it gets us objective truth." If one asks why should we want objective truth," the reply is "because that's the only way to get knowledge without perspectives."

A problem that we are now faced with

Critical, questioning powers we've developed from the slave revolt and ascetic ideals: these now can be used to show that the foundations of what we believed in the past don't stand up.

-- so now what do we do?

A possible response

In ancient Greek drama, after a trilogy of tragedies, there would often be a “satyr play” that would allow us to laugh at ourselves, not just wallow in the tragedy of life

-- could we respond similarly now to the undermining of our values?

-- perhaps now we need Dionysus, sensuality, trust in desires rather than just rationality; or perhaps a synthesis of these (sensuality and rationality).

Questions for discussion

1. “Science is the religion of our time.” To what extent do you think Nietzsche’s conclusions in Treatise III have anticipated contemporary society? Do we still have faith in science, or do we question it in the ways N suggests?

2. Does Nietzsche successfully equip us to break the Sisyphean cycle of existence?

Discussion on these from the class

Regarding question #1

Science doesn’t give prescriptions, doesn’t give us a reason to act; this has to come from somewhere else, so it can’t be the only important sort of knowledge

If we think of “science” in N’s text as referring in a wider sense to post-enlightenment rationality and logic, then we can say we still subscribe to a metaphysical notion of truth. We also still have a rational, scientific way of approaching politics & economics.

Some people do still treat science like a religion, such as Richard Dawkins.

Regarding question #2

We are still going to be left in limbo for awhile—God is still not fully dead, according to Nietzsche. More people will have to get to the stage of recognizing God’s death and questioning the will to truth before we can move on.

Perspectivism itself breaks the Sisyphean cycle: if the problem of suffering is that it is meaningless, we can recognize that this claim is itself coming from a particular perspective. We don’t have to think of life as full of suffering and that suffering as needing a meaning. Now we can, as suggested above, be more Dionysian and have more “play” in life.