

On the Genealogy of Morals

A Polemical Tract

by

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Prologue

1

We don't know ourselves, we knowledgeable people — we are personally ignorant about ourselves. And there's good reason for that. We've never tried to find out who we are — how could it happen that one day we'd *discover* ourselves? With justice it's been said, "Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also."* *Our* treasure lies where the beehives of our knowledge stand. We are always busy with our knowledge, as born winged creatures and collectors of spiritual honey. In our hearts we are basically concerned with only one thing — to "bring something home." As far as the rest of life is concerned, what people call "experience," — which of us is serious enough for that? Or has enough time? In these matters, I fear, we've been "missing the point." Our hearts have simply not been engaged with that — nor, for that matter, have our ears!

We've been much more like someone divinely distracted and self-absorbed into whose ear the clock has just pealed the twelve strokes of noon with all its force and who all at once wakes up and asks himself "What exactly did that clock strike?" — so now and then we rub our ears *afterwards* and ask, totally surprised and completely embarrassed "What have we really just experienced?" And more: "Who are we really?" Then, as I've mentioned, we count — after the fact — all the twelve trembling strokes of the clock of our experience, of our lives, of our *being* — alas! in the process we keep losing the count . . . So we remain simply and necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not understand ourselves, we *must* be confused about ourselves. For us this law holds for all eternity: "Each man is furthest from himself" — where we ourselves are concerned, we are not "knowledgeable people" . . .

2

My thoughts about the *origin* of our moral prejudices — for this polemical tract is concerned about that origin — had their first brief, provisional expression in that collection of aphorisms which carried the title *Human, All-too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, which I started to write in Sorrento, during a winter when I had the chance to pause, just as a traveller stops, and to look over the wide and dangerous land through which my spirit had wandered up to that point. This happened in the winter 1876-77, but

the ideas themselves are older. In the main points, they were the same ideas which I am taking up again in these present essays: — let's hope that the long interval of time has done them some good, that they have become riper, brighter, stronger, and more complete!

But *the fact that* today I still stand by these ideas, that in the intervening time they themselves have constantly become more strongly associated with one another, in fact, have grown into each other and intertwined, that reinforces in me the joyful confidence that they may not have originally developed in me as single, random, or sporadic ideas, but up out of a common root, out of some *fundamental will* for knowledge ruling from deep within, always speaking with greater clarity, always demanding greater clarity. For that's the only thing appropriate to a philosopher. We have no right to be *scattered* in any way: we are not permitted to make isolated mistakes or to run into isolated truths. By contrast, our ideas, our values, our affirmations and denials, our *if's* and *whether's* grow out of us from the same necessity which makes a tree bear its fruit — totally related and interlinked amongst each other, witnesses of one will, one health, one soil, one sun. — As for the question whether these fruits of ours taste good to *you* — what does that matter to the trees! What concern is that to *us*, we philosophers! . . .

3

Because of a doubt peculiar to my nature, which I am reluctant to confess — for it concerns itself with *morality*, with everything which up to the present has been celebrated on earth as morality — a doubt which came into my life so early, so uninvited, so irresistibly, in such contradiction to my surroundings, my age, the examples around me, and my origin, that I would almost have the right to call it my “*a priori*” [*before experience*] — because of this, my curiosity as well as my suspicions had to pause early on at the question about where our good and evil really *originated*.

In fact, already as a thirteen-year-old lad, my mind was occupying itself with the problem of the origin of evil. At an age when one has “half childish play, half God in one's heart,” I devoted my first childish literary trifle, my first written philosophical exercise, to this problem — and so far as my “solution” to it at that time is concerned, well, I gave that honour to God, as is reasonable, and made him the *father* of evil. Is *that* precisely what my “*a priori*” demanded of me, that new immoral, at the very least unmoral “*a priori*” and the cryptic “categorical imperative” which spoke out from it, alas, so anti-Kantian, which I have increasingly listened to ever since — and not just listened to? . . . *

Luckily at an early stage I learned to separate theological prejudices from moral ones, and I no longer sought the origin of evil *behind* the world. Some education in history and philology, along with an inherently refined sense concerning psychological questions in general, quickly changed my problem into something else: Under what conditions did man invent for himself those value judgments good and evil? *And what value do they inherently possess?* Have they hindered or fostered human well-being up to now? Are they a

sign of some emergency, of impoverishment, of an atrophying life? Or is it the other way around? Do they indicate fullness, power, a will for living, courage, confidence, his future? —

After that I came across and proposed all sorts of answers for myself. I distinguished between ages, peoples, different ranks of individuals. I kept refining my problem. Out of the answers arose new questions, investigations, assumptions, probabilities, until at last I had my own country, my own soil, a totally secluded, flowering, blooming world, a secret garden, as it were, of which no one had the slightest inkling. O how *lucky* we are, we knowledgeable people, provided only that we know how to stay silent long enough! . . .

4

The first stimulus to publish something of my hypothesis concerning the origin of morality was given to me by a lucid, tidy, clever, even precocious little book, in which for the first time I clearly ran into a topsy-turvy and perverse type of genealogical hypothesis — a genuinely English style. It drew me with that power of attraction which everything opposite, everything antipodal contains. The title of this booklet was *The Origin of the Moral Feelings*. Its author was Dr Paul Rée, and it appeared in the year 1877.* I have perhaps never read anything which I would have denied, statement by statement, conclusion by conclusion, as I did with this book, but without any sense of annoyance or impatience.

In the work I mentioned above, on which I was working at the time, I made opportune and inopportune references to statements in Dr. Rée's book, not in order to prove them wrong — what have I to do with preparing refutations! — but, as is appropriate to a positive spirit, to put in the place of something unlikely something more likely and possibly in the place of some error a different error.

At that time, as I said, for the first time I brought into the light of day that hypotheses about genealogy, to which these essays have been dedicated — but clumsily, as I will be the last to deny, still fettered, still without my own language for these concerns of mine, and with all sorts of retreating and vacillating. For particular details, you should compare what I said in *Human, All-too Human*, 45, about the double nature of the prehistory of good and evil (that is, in the spheres of the nobility and the slaves); similarly, section 136, concerning the worth and origin of ascetic morality, as well as sections 96, 99, and 2.89 concerning the “Morality of Custom,” that much older and more primitive style of morality, which lies *toto coelo* [an enormous distance] from the altruistic way of valuing (which Dr. Rée, like all English genealogists of morality, sees as the *very essence* of moral evaluation); similarly, 1.92, *Wanderer* section 26, and *The Dawn* 112, concerning the origin of justice as a compromise between approximately equal powers (equality as a precondition of all contracts and therefore of all justice); likewise concerning the origin of punishment in *Wanderer* 22, 33, for which an intent to terrify is neither the essential thing

nor the origin (as Dr. Rée claims: — it is far more likely first brought in under a specific set of conditions and always as something incidental, something additional).*

5

Basically even then the real concern for me at heart was something much more important than coming up with hypotheses about the origin of morality, either my own or from other people (or, more precisely stated — this latter issue was important to me only for the sake of a goal to which it was one path out of many). For me the issue was the *value* of morality — and in that matter I had to take issue almost alone with my great teacher Schopenhauer, to whom, as if to a contemporary, that book, with its passion and hidden contradiction, addresses itself (— for that book was also a “polemical tract”).* The most specific issue was the worth of the “un-egoistic,” the instinct for pity, self-denial, self-sacrifice, something which Schopenhauer himself had painted with gold, deified, and projected into the next world for so long that it finally remained for him “value in itself” and the reason why he *said No* to life and even to himself.

But a constantly more fundamental suspicion of *these* very instincts voiced itself in me, a scepticism which always dug deeper! It was precisely here that I saw the *great* danger to humanity, its most sublime temptation and seduction. — But in what direction? To nothingness? — It was precisely here I saw the beginning of the end, the standing still, the backward-glancing exhaustion, the will turning itself *against* life, the final illness tenderly and sadly announcing itself. I understood the morality of pity, which was always seizing more and more around it and which gripped even the philosophers and made them sick, as the most sinister symptom of our European culture, which itself had become sinister, as its detour to a new Buddhism? to a European Buddhism? to — *nihilism?* . . .

This modern philosophical preference for and overvaluing of pity is really something new. Concerning the *worthlessness* of pity philosophers up to now have been in agreement. I name only Plato, Spinoza, La Rochefoucauld, and Kant — four spirits as different from one another as possible, but united in one thing, in the low value they set on pity.* —

6

This problem of the *value* of pity and of the morality of pity (— I’m an opponent of the disgraceful modern immaturity of feelings —) appears at first to be only something isolated, a detached question mark. But anyone who remains there for a while and *learns* to ask questions will experience what happened to me: — a huge new vista opens up before him, a possibility grips him like an attack of dizziness, all sorts of mistrust, suspicion, and fear spring up, his belief in morality, in all morality, starts to totter — and finally he hears a new demand.

Let’s proclaim this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *we must first question the very value of these values* — and for that we need a knowledge of the conditions and

circumstances out of which these values grew, under which they have developed and changed (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as *Tartufferie* [*hypocrisy*], as illness, as misunderstanding, but also morality as cause, as means of healing, as stimulant, as scruple, as poison), a knowledge of the sort which has not been there up this point, something which has not even been wished for. We have taken the *worth* of these “values” as something given, as self-evident, as beyond all dispute. Up until now people have also not had the slightest doubts about or wavered in setting up “the good man” as more valuable than “the evil man,” of higher worth in the sense of the improvement, usefulness, and prosperity with respect to mankind in general (along with the future of humanity).

What about this? What if the truth were the other way around? Well? What if in the “good” there even lay a symptom of regression, something like a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic, something which makes the present live *at the cost of the future*? Perhaps something more comfortable, less dangerous, but also on a smaller scale, something more demeaning? . . . So that this very morality would be guilty if the inherently possible *highest power and magnificence* of the human type were never attained? So that this very morality might be the danger of all dangers? . . .

7

Suffice it to say that once this insight revealed itself to me, I had reasons to look around for learned, bold, and hard-working comrades (today I’m still searching). It’s a matter of travelling through the immense, distant, and so secretive land of morality — morality which has really existed, which has really been lived — with nothing but new questions and, as it were, new eyes. Isn’t that almost like *discovering* this land for the first time? . . .

In this matter, it so happened I thought of, among others, the above-mentioned Dr. Rée, because I had no doubts at all that by the very nature of his questions he would be driven to a more correct methodology in order to arrive at any answers. Did I deceive myself in this? At any rate, my desire was to provide a better direction for such a keen and objective eye as his, a direction leading to a true *history of morality* and to advise him in time against the English way of making hypotheses by *staring off into the blue*.

For, indeed, it’s obvious which colour must be a hundred times more important for a genealogist of morality than this blue: namely, gray, in other words, what has been documented, what can be established as the truth, what really took place, in short, the long, difficult-to-decipher hieroglyphic writing of the past in human morality. — *This* was unknown to Dr. Rée. But he had read Darwin: — and so to some extent in his hypotheses the Darwinian beast and the most modern modest and tender moral sensibility, which “no longer bites,” politely extend their hands to each other in a way that is at least entertaining — with the latter bearing a facial expression revealing a certain good-natured and refined indolence, in which is even mixed a grain of pessimism, of

exhaustion, as if it is really not worth taking all these things — the problems of morality — so seriously.*

But for me things appear reversed: there are no issues which are more *worth* taking seriously; among the rewards, for example, is the fact that one day perhaps people will be permitted to take them *cheerfully*. For cheerfulness, or, to say it in my own language, *the gay science*, is a reward, a reward for a lengthy, brave, hard-working, and underground seriousness, which, of course, is not something for everyone. But on that day when, from full hearts, we say “Forward! Our old morality also belongs *in a comedy!*”, we’ll have discovered a new complication and possibility for the Dionysian drama of “the fate of the soul”: — and we can bet that he will put it to good use, the grand old immortal comic poet of our existence! . . .

8

If this writing is incomprehensible to someone or other and hurts his ears, the blame for that, it strikes me, is not necessarily mine. The writing is sufficiently clear given the conditions I set out — that you have first read my earlier writings and have taken some trouble to do that, for, in fact, these works are not easily accessible. For example, so far as my *Zarathustra* is concerned, I don’t consider anyone knowledgeable about it who has not at some time or another been deeply wounded by and profoundly delighted with every word in it.* For only then can he enjoy the privilege of sharing with reverence in the halcyon element out of which that work was born, in its sunny clarity, distance, breadth, and certainty.

In other cases the aphoristic form creates difficulties. These stem from the fact that nowadays people don’t take this form *seriously enough*. An aphorism, properly stamped and poured, has not yet been “deciphered” simply by being read. It’s much more the case that only now can one begin *to explicate* it, and that requires an art of interpretation. In the third essay of this book I have set out a model of what I call an “interpretation” for such a case. — In this essay an aphorism is presented, and the essay itself is a commentary on it. Of course, in order to practice this style of reading as *art*, one thing is above all essential, something that today has been thoroughly forgotten — and so it will require still more time before my writings are “readable” — something for which one almost needs to be a cow, at any rate *not* a “modern man” — *rumination*.

Sils-Maria,
July 1887

Oberengadin

Notes

... *heart be also*: The quotation come from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 6. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

a priori: This phrase refers to some idea or capacity one possesses inherently, something not provided by experience. The phrase is associated with the theories of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) the great German philosopher; *categorical imperative*: the key phrase in Kant's morality, the idea that moral action consists of acting upon a principle which could become a rational moral principle without creating a moral contradiction ("Act so that the maxim [which determines your will] may be capable of becoming a universal law for all rational beings"). [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Paul Rée (1849-1901): German philosopher and friend of Nietzsche's. His *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* was published in 1877. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Wanderer was published in 1880 and *Daybreak* (or *Dawn*) in 1881. In these references to Nietzsche's earlier works the page numbers he gives in his text have been replaced with section numbers. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Schopenhauer: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), German philosopher whose work exercised an important influence on Nietzsche, especially his emphasis on the importance of the human will. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Plato (428-348 BC), the most important of the classical Greek philosophers; *Spinoza*: Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), Dutch philosopher; *La Rochefoucauld*: Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), French author, famous for his maxims. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Darwin: Charles Darwin (1809-1882), English scientist whose *Origin of Species* was published in 1859. [\[Back to Text\]](#)

Zarathustra: Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was written between 1883 and 1885. [\[Back to Text\]](#)