

Nietzsche's Critique of Morality: Extracting the Bricks from the Ruins

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In the first section of this paper, I will deal with a question of interpretation, that question being: what, for Nietzsche, is wrong with the values of the priests? Here I consider the following alternatives:

- 1) The values of the priests are merely invented.
- 2) In contrast to the values of the nobles, the values of the priests are necessarily negative.
- 3) The values of the priests are not good for the health of the priests themselves.
- 4) The values of the priests hinder the progress of the strong and thus hinder human flourishing.

There is indeed some textual support for each of these interpretations. And it is certainly true that Nietzsche did think the values of the priests were mere inventions, and that they were necessarily negative, and indeed that they were not good for the health of the priests themselves. However, I will argue that, although Nietzsche did often stress these flaws, the only plausible interpretation of Nietzsche is one that stresses the fact that, for Nietzsche, the real reason for rejecting the moral judgements of the priests is that they hinder the progress of the strong, and therefore hinder human flourishing.

In the second section of the paper, I draw attention to another conflict in Nietzsche's writing. This conflict is between a view that simply advocates survival of the fittest and a view that wants to make moral judgements, *condemning* the priests. In this case, I don't favour one interpretation over the other. Rather, I argue that Nietzsche's position is not plausible on either interpretation.

In the third section of the paper, however, I argue that, although Nietzsche's position is implausible, his work does contain the basic ideas necessary to identify what might really be wrong with the priests' values. Furthermore, many of these flaws may still be present in many of the moral judgements that we continue to make today.

Thus, I will argue that, although we should reject Nietzsche's project as a whole, we should not conclude that Nietzsche's arguments are irrelevant to contemporary concerns and debates. We can – and should – extract from Nietzsche's arguments some of the building blocks necessary to build a new theory: one that guides us in refining our moral judgements, rather than just telling us to reject them all.

Finally, in the fourth section, I will turn from questions of moral theory to address questions of prudential ethics. Here, despite denying the interpretation that suggests that Nietzsche meant *The Genealogy* to be read as a therapeutic book, I will argue that there is value in reading Nietzsche in this way – regardless of what he himself intended.

Section I

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (all references refer to this text, unless otherwise stated), Nietzsche divides men into the strong, the lords, the aristocratic, the knights, the birds of prey on the one hand, and the weak, the priests, the Jews, the slaves, the lambs on the other. According to Nietzsche's account, the strong dominated and flourished. Unrestricted by (a poisonous) morality, they achieved greatness. Nietzsche takes the Roman Empire to be the epitome of this ideal. The value equation of the aristocratic is as follows: "good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God". (Treatise I, section 7, p. 16.)

The weak, however, invert the value judgements of the aristocrats, such that

the poor, powerless, lowly are good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are also the only pious... - whereas you, you noble and powerful ones, you are in all eternity the evil...(Treatise I, section 7, pp. 16-17.)

To understand this claim of Nietzsche's it is vital that one understands his idea of *ressentiment*. Brian Leiter states that the psychological state of *ressentiment* is produced by "a state of affairs that is both *unpleasant* to the affected person and one which he is powerless to alter through physical action." (Leiter, 2002, p. 202) Nietzsche however is not concerned simply with the psychological state. Anyone can *feel* *ressentiment*. Nietzsche is interested in the "man of *ressentiment*", whose "soul *squints*" (Treatise I, section 10); the man whose *ressentiment* is "consolidated into a [character] trait," to use Peter Goldie's phrase (Goldie, 2000, p. 150).

Nietzsche stresses the point that the priests are not well-equipped to fight. They neither have nor value the physical strength of the nobles. He writes,

Priests are, as is well known, the *most evil enemies* – why is that? Because they are the most powerless. Out of their powerlessness their hate grows into something enormous and uncanny, into something spiritual and most poisonous. (Treatise I, section 7, p. 16.)

That is, it grows into the priests' revaluation of values: morality. Nietzsche writes, "The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values". (Treatise I, section 10, p. 19.) "Weakness is to be lied into a *merit*". Treatise I, section 14, p. 26.)

Given this account, the most obvious answer to the question of what is wrong with the priests' values is that they are mere inventions. However, this cannot be right. Nietzsche makes it quite clear that the values of the nobles are equally an invention, and not based on any justifiable claims to truth. The noble one calls good all that he is. He "conceives the basic concept 'good' in advance and spontaneously, starting from himself." (Treatise I, section II, p. 21.) He calls good a "powerful physicality... together with that which is required for its preservation" (Treatise I, section 7, p. 16).

Thus, the original values that the weak inverted are themselves mere inventions on Nietzsche's account. Given that this is the case, what reason do we have to regret the victory of the Jewish empires, and the inversion of the aristocratic value judgements? Although aristocratic values are no less an invention than the values of the priests, Nietzsche reserves his most vicious attacks for the latter.

Leiter also makes the additional point that, if Nietzsche did object to the priests' values on the grounds of their origin, he would be committing the genetic fallacy, "the fallacy of thinking the origin of X demonstrates something about the value of X." (Leiter, 2002, p. 173) Leiter argues that Nietzsche was aware of this, and that he was not guilty of committing this fallacy.

On another interpretation, Nietzsche is opposed to the values of the priests *primarily* because of their negativity. In contrast to the positive and life-affirming nature of the nobles' values, the priests create evil first, and create it to poison the nobles. The "good" then is only an afterthought, and refers to those least like the lords: the meek, the sick, the deprived and the poor. Thus, the values of the weak are necessarily negative, built on hatred and *ressentiment*.

Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says "no" to an "outside," to a "different," to a "not-self": and *this* "no" is its creative deed. (Treatise I, section 10, p. 19)

It seems that this does provide some reason to respect the values of the nobles over the values of the priests. It seems, however, that it is a pro tanto reason only. The fact that the nobles' values are life-affirming and life-embracing is a reason in favour of them, but it is not sufficient to justify them, or to make them preferable to the values of the priests, all things considered. This becomes more apparent if we consider that these values allow the nobles to

Walk away from a hideous succession of murder, arson, rape, torture with such high spirits and equanimity that

it seems as if they have only played a student prank, convinced that for years to come the poets will again have something to sing and to praise. (Treatise I, section 11, p. 22)

Some of those who, in their interpretation of Nietzsche, stress the negative nature of the priests' values also argue that, for Nietzsche, man is sick and needs to be cured. Arthur C. Danto writes,

...the question must be raised as to who the readers were to be... and what particularly were they to get from it... I want to claim that the *Genealogy* is in this respect a medical book: etiological, diagnostic, therapeutic, prognostic. I want to underscore *therapeutic* here, for the book is not for other practitioners of the caring art so much as it is for those who suffer from the diseases it addresses. So the assumption must be that the intended reader is sick, if typically in ways unrecognised by him: one learns the nature of one's illness as one reads the book... So the book has to be painful. And arguably the cure more painful than the disease, with which, after all, we have grown comfortable. (Danto, 1994, pp. 40-41)

We all have to recognise our feelings of *ressentiment* for what they are. It may be a hard truth to swallow, but it is one we ought to swallow regardless, for the alternative is worse (even if more comfortable). Peter Goldie writes,

...the thought is that if we do not *face up to* our feelings and to what we are bottling up, and recognize them for what they really are, then perhaps, as Nietzsche says, our souls will squint. (Goldie, 2000, p. 151)

I suggest, however, that we will recognise that this cannot have been Nietzsche's intention if we remember Nietzsche's claim that

...the ascetic ideal springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life that seeks with every means to hold its ground and is fighting for its existence... in it and through it life is wrestling with death and *against* death; the ascetic ideal is an artifice for the *preservation* of life. (Treatise III, section 13, p. 86)

Although the weak are sick – deformed by their ascetic morality – there is clearly a sense in which they are better off than they would be if they had not convinced the strong of their lies – if they had not been victorious.

Furthermore, it would be very strange if Nietzsche was concerned that the weak are sick, that their souls squint, but was not concerned that they are murdered or raped.

It seems much more natural to conclude that Nietzsche is concerned only with those who could achieve greatness. He wants them to see through the lies that hinder them. This is supported by the following:

Humanity as mass sacrificed for the flourishing of a single stronger species of human being – that *would be* progress (Treatise II, section 12, p. 52)

And also

Under what conditions did man invent those value judgements good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? (Preface, section 3, p. 2)

Thus, the problem with the priests' values is simply that they inhibit human flourishing. Furthermore, as the first of the two quotes suggests, Nietzsche's idea of human flourishing is measured by the greatest heights achieved by the highest achievers, regardless of how many or how few reach these heights, and regardless of the plight of the rest.

Section II

At this point though, we should highlight a conflict in Nietzsche's thought. That conflict is between a view that simply allows survival of the fittest and a view that wants to make moral judgements, condemning the priests. If this conflict cannot be resolved it will seem that Nietzsche is like a thug who starts a fight with a victim he perceives to be smaller and weaker than himself, and then, on losing, complains that his victim "fights dirty."

First, let us consider the state of Nietzsche's position if we interpret it as a moral claim, and assume that his judgements against the priests are indeed moral judgements. This is not going to look plausible. As has been noted, it is highly counter-intuitive to suggest that murder and rape are permissible, but lying is not. Clearly, Nietzsche would justify this by appeal to his ultimate value: that of human flourishing. However, Nietzsche does nothing to explain why this single value is so important, above all else. Even those who embrace Nietzsche's elitism and agree that we should "Maximise the heights of achievement reached by humanity" (Hooker, 2000, p. 61) may feel that there are limits to what can be done to achieve this goal. Nietzsche, however, doesn't even consider this possibility.

For example, we might embrace Nietzsche's arguments in favour of valuing strength over weakness, health over sickness, and cheerful-hearted activity over asceticism, without also embracing the less appealing aspects of his philosophy. For example, we might appeal to these values in order to defend an activity such as boxing. Embracing these positive values, and seeing nobility in the strength and skill of the boxer, and his willingness to take a risk, and to fight his opponent with respect and without hatred, we might argue that those who oppose boxing are merely squeamish and unwilling to place proper value on strength and bravery.

Regarding the claim that we should admire the boxer who fights his opponent with respect and without hatred, see *Treatise I*, section 10, p. 21, for Nietzsche's claim that the weak hate their enemies, while the noble respect theirs. How often boxers and other fighters live up to this ideal is of course another question, but it undoubtedly happens sometimes. Consider the following quote from the jiu jitsu fighter Royler Gracie: "I really wanted to fight Sakuraba, not only because he was heavier than me, but also because he was such a good fighter and strategist. I wanted to find out how I was going to behave fighting against a larger opponent of such high calibre. It was a challenge that I wanted to do for myself, not for anyone else." (From Peligro, 2003, p. 38)

Even if we do embrace these values, however, and argue in this manner, surely we must distinguish between the noble pugilist on the one hand and the thug who picks fights with non-consenting victims on the other. We can share with Nietzsche a feeling that we should value strength rather than weakness without concluding that the strong may use their strength against the weak in any way they choose. It is a method of making such a demarcation (or even an acknowledgement that such a demarcation is required) that is lacking in Nietzsche's philosophy.

Alternatively, let us suppose then that Nietzsche is *not* trying to make a moral claim. Writing about the amoralist, Bernard Williams writes,

...if he objects (as he no doubt will) to other people treating him as he treats them, this will be perfectly consistent so long as his objecting consists just in such things as not liking it and fighting back. What he cannot consistently do is *resent* it or disapprove of it, for these are attitudes within the moral system. (Williams, 1972, p. 5)

If the Nietzschean view is to avoid this objection, we have to show that Nietzsche's attack on the weak is not a moral attack. It is not clear that this view is plausible in the light of the following claims:

On such ground of self-contempt, a true swamp ground, every weed grows, every poisonous plant, and all of it so small, so hidden, so dishonest, so cloying. Here the worms of vengeful and grudging feelings teem... here the web of the most vicious conspiracy spins itself constantly... And what mendacity not to acknowledge this hate as hate! ...Among them there are plenty of vengeful ones disguised as judges, who constantly carry the word "justice" in their mouths like poisonous saliva... the mendacious misbirths who are out to play the role of "beautiful souls" ... (Treatise III, section 14, pp. 87-88)

Furthermore, even if we do deny that these are *moral* objections, where does that leave Nietzsche? If it is not a moral objection, what is it? Is it anything more than a tantrum? The Jews were victorious, as he concedes (Treatise

I, section 17, p. 17), and he doesn't like it, and thus he rants and wails.

At best, the book is a war cry, addressed to those who could achieve greatness if unhindered by lies. On this account, Nietzsche is like the amoralist whose objecting consists just in such things as not liking it and fighting back. On this view though, he cannot *complain* that the weak lie. Furthermore, the Nietzschean cannot complain if the priests lock him up and burn his books?

I suggest, therefore, that Nietzsche's view lacks plausibility on either interpretation.

Section III

Finally though, I want to argue that there is, nevertheless, something of value in Nietzsche's discussion of the priests' values. This will be easier to extract from Nietzsche's theory if we contrast Nietzsche's idea of the priests' *ressentiment* becoming creative and giving birth to values with Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes. (Brian Leiter made this comparison in his lectures at UCL, 2003. Also see Goldie, 2000, p. 151n)

A hungry fox saw some fine bunches of grapes hanging from a vine along a high trellis, and did his best to reach them by jumping as high as he could into the air. But it was all in vain, for they were just out of reach: so he gave up trying, and walked away with an air of dignity and unconcern, remarking, 'I thought those grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour.' (Aesop, 1994, p. 23)

As in Nietzsche's idea of *ressentiment*, there is an unpleasant fact: the grapes are too high for the fox to reach. Furthermore, the fox is powerless to do anything about it. This leads to the feeling of *ressentiment*. And the fox then concludes that he doesn't want the grapes after all. He sees them as sour.

It should be noted that there is a difference between the fox's response to the unpleasant fact, and the priests'. On Nietzsche's account, if the priest had been in the fox's position, he wouldn't have concluded that the grapes were sour. Rather, he would have concluded that, actually, he didn't value grapes, or even that he didn't value sweetness. (I owe this point to David Arnaud.) Indeed, it would be more in keeping with Nietzsche's account to suggest that the priest would value the feeling of hunger, and take it to be a virtue not to be tempted by the corrupting influence of sweet, sensuous grapes. Arnaud also makes the point that, unlike the priest, the fox does not revalue his *values*. The fox still values grapes, and he still prefers sweetness to sourness. He merely concludes that *these particular* grapes are sour, and not sweet. Nevertheless, the analogy is close enough to be illuminating. The point is that, even if the fox does not revalue his values, he does alter his judgement of the grapes, and most importantly does so

without any justification. It is his *ressentiment*, and only his *ressentiment*, that is responsible for the revaluation of the grapes.

Thus, it seems that, on Nietzsche's view, the values of the priests are simply sour grapes. They can't be strong, so they tell themselves that they never wanted to be strong in the first place, and so on. However, this seems more plausible in relation to some values than others. If we consider the priests' ascetic attitudes towards sensuality, physical activity and pleasure this view seems quite plausible.

When we consider morality's attitude towards murder and rape, however, it is less plausible to suppose that these values can be characterised as sour grapes. Clearly, we think there is a firmer foundation for these values.

Of course, Nietzsche's argument is meant precisely to deny the existence of such foundations. However, Nietzsche in fact offers very little in the way of argument against the *possibility* of a firmer foundation for a correct morality. Indeed, Nietzsche himself offers his own account of a foundation from which values can be derived. For Nietzsche, an act's value is determined by the extent to which it contributes to human flourishing, understood in Nietzsche's elitist sense. Thus, the claim that *all* moral judgements are nothing more than sour grapes is not only implausible, it is also inconsistent with Nietzsche's own arguments.

Nevertheless, many of Nietzsche's arguments may be illuminating, highlighting what is wrong with some of the priests' values, and indeed with some of the moral judgements that remain prevalent today.

On this view, the problem is that the priestly attitudes towards sensuality, physical activity, pleasure, sex, beauty and physical strength are like the fox's attitude towards the grapes he cannot reach. Thus, if we want a viable alternative to the values of the priests, we need to purge the Judaeo-Christian morality of its sour grapes, which would indeed involve curing people of their sickness in the way that Danto and Goldie suggest. And this could be done both for the sake of the ill, to cure them of their *ressentiment*, and also for the sake of those they judge and try to hinder.

Recognising our *ressentiment* for what it is, we would not let it consolidate into a character trait, and we could prevent it from seeping into our value judgements. Thus, as individuals who are prone to *ressentiment*, we may all be healthier, free of its most damaging effects. And as individuals who often place limits on our own behaviour, either to conform to laws or to conform to public opinion, we could free ourselves from restrictive rules that lack legitimate foundations.

And, of course, there is no reason to suppose that, once we purge Judeo-Christian morality of its sour grapes, there will be nothing left. The newly-discovered morality would not forbid sensual pleasure, but it would still forbid harassment and rape; and it would continue to demand that the strong do not torment or harm the weak, but it would do so without denying that strength is more valuable than weakness.

Clearly, this is not an account that can be attributed to Nietzsche. Nietzsche was arguing in favour of a wholesale rejection of morality – or at least of Judaeo-Christian morality. Nevertheless, I suggest that we can extract from Nietzsche's arguments some of the building blocks necessary to build a new theory: one that guides us in the refining of our moral judgements, rather than just telling us to reject them all.

As such, it is fitting that Nietzsche wrote

The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building: posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building: in the fact, that is to say, that the building can be destroyed and *nonetheless* possess value as material. (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 33)

Section IV

In this paper, I have argued that many of Nietzsche's arguments against traditional morality are flawed, but I also concluded the last section by arguing that there is much that we can learn from Nietzsche regardless. In particular, it is vital that we do rid our moral judgements of the distorting influence of *ressentiment*.

In addition, I also argued against the interpretation of Nietzsche that suggests that he intended *On The Genealogy of Morality* to be "therapeutic". However, just because this is not what Nietzsche intended, it does not follow that we should not use his book in this way. If it is true that there is value in reading the book as a cure for a sickness, as Danto and Goldie claim, this will not be undermined by arguing that this was not Nietzsche's intention.

As a result, regardless of what Nietzsche actually intended, we can make use of his ideas in two ways. First, as I have already argued, we should ensure that our moral judgements are not distorted by *ressentiment*, and second, we can follow Danto and Goldie in treating *On The Genealogy of Morality* as a therapeutic book.

Thus far, I have concentrated on the former, but in this section I will concentrate on the latter. I will argue, however, that there will not always be a clear distinction between the two projects. For example, one way to rid our moral judgements of the distorting influence of *ressentiment* would be to rid *ourselves* of *ressentiment*. In addition to this

though, I will also argue that a certain amount of moral philosophy may be required in order to avoid becoming creatures of *ressentiment* in the first place. In this sense, we should work from both ends (to borrow a phrase from John Rawls).

If we are going to read *The Genealogy* as a therapeutic book, in order to avoid becoming creatures of *ressentiment* we need to know how to recognise a creature of *ressentiment*. Before we can do this, however, we need to recognise the psychological state of *ressentiment*.

Brian Leiter describes the psychological state of *ressentiment* as one produced by "a state of affairs that is both unpleasant to the affected person and one which he is powerless to alter through physical action." (Leiter, 2002, p. 202)

Here, one could object that this is not a satisfactory account of *ressentiment*. A psychological state produced by such a state of affairs could be one of defiance, stoicism, or acceptance. And thus, the claim would be that *ressentiment* is not the only psychological state that could be produced by the state of affairs Leiter describes and therefore, unless Leiter refines his definition to distinguish *ressentiment* from these other psychological states, his definition is unhelpful.

To be fair to Leiter, however, how else do you explain a psychological state other than by citing the situations in which they are likely to occur? If you had to explain jealousy to someone (without using synonyms), it would be natural to say something like: it's the psychological state that you would be *likely* to be in if you saw your wife kissing another man. But note the insertion of "likely". This is a prediction. We are not saying that any psychological state can be called jealousy, just as long as this is the state you are in when you see your wife kissing another man. If you hate your wife, and are therefore delighted because now you have grounds for divorce, it would be absurd to conclude that you are jealous. But, nevertheless, despite this imprecision, the account of jealousy I gave seems acceptable to me.

I suggest, therefore, that only a slight amendment of our definition of *ressentiment* is required. Thus we can describe the psychological state of *ressentiment* as one that is *typically* produced – or is *likely* to be produced – by "a state of affairs that is both unpleasant to the affected person and one which he is powerless to alter through physical action."

In addition, Leiter does say more to distinguish *ressentiment* from defiance and the other psychological states that could be produced by unpleasant state of affairs that one is powerless to alter. Leiter writes:

It is important to remember here that *ressentiment* draws on the resources of more familiar emotions such as hatred and vengefulness. Men of *ressentiment* are, says

Nietzsche, "cellar rats full of revenge and hatred" (GM I: 14). *Ressentiment* provides the slaves an imaginary revenge" (GM I: 10) and conceals "a whole, vibrating realm of subterranean revenge" (GM III: 14). (Leiter, 2002, p 203. GM is Leiter's abbreviation of *On The Genealogy of Morality*.)

However, it also seems clear that *ressentiment* is not limited to "drawing from" revenge and hate. The fox, for example, isn't vengeful; and, although we might say that he *hates* the fact that the grapes are beyond his reach, this doesn't seem the most natural description of the situation. I suggest that *ressentiment* also draws from frustration, anger, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, and probably other emotions besides. (See Goldie, 2000, p. 150, and Leiter, 2002, p. 75)

Now we can return to the question we started with: how does a person know if he is becoming (or has already become) a creature of *ressentiment*? This seems analogous to the question, how does a person know if he is a bitter or angry person? A common-sense answer would to say simply that the angry person is always – or, at least, too often – angry. Or, more eloquently:

The person who feels anger towards someone in particular can be left in a mood of *ressentiment* through frustration of his desires, and this feeling – now less specifically towards things in general – can itself consolidate into a trait: he becomes a resentful *person*, habitually disposed to have resentful thoughts and feelings towards all sorts of specific persons and things. Similarly, the jilted lover can become bitter and contemptuous of the world, and this too can consolidate into trait. (Goldie, 2000, p. 150)

However, this response might seem unsatisfactory. Although it seems to be true, it may be objected that it is trivially true, and therefore uninformative. It seems analytically true to say that the angry person is angry more often than the person who is not angry, and that the person of *ressentiment* is prone to *ressentiment* more than others. What we hoped for was something a little more informative than this.

At this point, I have two responses. The first is to say that we should not underestimate our ability to recognise that we are creatures of *ressentiment* on the basis of the sort of account that has just been given. A similar approach seems successful enough in diagnosing when a person becomes an angry person. Nevertheless, I do think that more can be said.

If one wants to avoid becoming a creature of *ressentiment*, one can look out for particular warning signs. The first way in which one can be sensitive to the warning signs is to engage in moral philosophy – to consider one's own moral judgements and try to justify them to oneself. To some extent, therefore, we will not always treat moral and prudential ethics completely separately. Rather, by answering one question, we will go some way to answering the other.

My idea here is that we must scrutinise the moral judgements that we make, and ask what grounds we have for making them. If, when pressed, we can't find any justification, then we should start to hear alarm bells.

Of course, I am not suggesting that this alone is enough. I am not suggesting that, on any occasion on which a justification can't be found, we can immediately conclude that the judgement in question is necessarily the result of a reevaluation of values based on *ressentiment*. There might, of course, be other explanations. Consider, for example, the claim that homosexuality is immoral. Those who make this claim usually struggle to offer a convincing justification for this moral judgement. They tend to resort to claims like "it's just not natural", "it's improper" or perhaps more tellingly, "it's disgusting", but it is not clear how these statements are supposed to justify the moral judgement that it is actually wrong. Kymlicka writes:

To say that homosexual sex is 'improper', without being able to point to any bad consequences, is like saying that Bob Dylan sings improperly – it may be true, but it is not a moral criticism. (Kymlicka, 2002, pp. 11-12)

Yet, it doesn't seem plausible to suggest that this particular distortion of moral judgements is the result of *ressentiment*. Rather, it seems more plausible to claim, in this case, that the person's moral judgement is distorted by feelings of disgust. (Why people should be disgusted by homosexuality is another question, but not one that I will attempt to answer here). All this shows, however, is that *ressentiment* is not the only distorting influence that we should be aware of.

Nevertheless, this engagement in moral philosophy can be an important first step, and one that can help us to identify the distorting influence of *ressentiment*. Consider, for example, the following lyrics from Bob Dylan's "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding."

Old lady judges watch people in pairs
Limited in sex, they dare
To push fake morals, insult and stare

This claim seems similar to Nietzsche's claim that the priests' rejection of sensuality and their idea that sex is sinful are both based on *ressentiment*. The old lady judges, Dylan suggests, are jealous or envious. (At least, this is one plausible interpretation.)

One way to assess the plausibility of the claim that these judges are creatures of *ressentiment* is to prompt them to engage in moral philosophy. If the old lady judges can point to some legitimate justification for saying that sex is sinful, then we could not legitimately "diagnose" them as being creatures of *ressentiment* – at least, not on the basis of the evidence being considered. If, on the other hand, they

fail to justify their moral judgements, we might have good reason to suggest that they read Nietzsche, and to think of it as therapeutic in the way Danto describes.

Of course, the mere lack of any good arguments is not sufficient to show that they themselves are creatures of *ressentiment*. Their moral beliefs may simply be the ones that they learnt and accepted without questioning them. At this stage, I fear there is little more to do except to rely on introspection. The scrutiny of one's moral beliefs does, nevertheless, seem to be an important first step (and is valuable in its own right, either way).

It should be noted, however, that it is not only our moral judgements that we ought to scrutinise. Consider pejorative terms such as "swot" and "teacher's pet". Generally, these terms are applied either to those who are academically the most successful in school or to those that work hard at school. They are not moral judgements, but they are value judgements, and we can challenge those who make them. Shouldn't we ask them *why* they don't value academic success and a strong work ethic? What justification could there be for considering these things to be of disvalue? Again, the alarm bells should be ringing, because this, again, looks like sour grapes. I would love to be top of my class. In academia, as in anything else, I want to be the best. But when I see that I am not top of the class, and am not even in competition with those at the top, I decide that I never *really* wanted to be top of the class at all. After all, who wants to be a swot? Luckily, this is an attitude that most people seem to grow out of as they mature into adults, but nevertheless it certainly has a detrimental effect on many students.

So far, we have looked at moral judgements and other value judgements as possible indicators, or warning signs, but they are not the only indicators. We might also look out for particular character traits, or the types of behaviour associated with these traits. Consider, for example, vindictiveness and envy. And consider those who find joy in the suffering of others.

Consider, for example, the magazine *Heat*, which includes features such as "Not as toned as you think!" – a photo feature that included the following captions.

Nicole Richie: The *Simple Life* star has hit the jackpot with her own mini rollover.

Sheila Ferguson: Memo to Sheila: with an overhang like that, ditch the belly-baring tops.

Britney Spears: Has all that toxic fast food gone to Britney's waist?

Charlotte Church: Welsh wonder Char's got the voice of an angel and the body of a cherub.

Beyonce: We've always admired her womanly curves and now we love them even more.

The majority are simply mean or vindictive, but the Beyonce caption is perhaps the most revealing. The thought seems to be: we loved her curves, but if she had great curves *and* a perfect flat stomach, wouldn't that be terrible. Wouldn't we hate and resent her if that was the case. But, given that she's a bit fat, it's okay. We can love her after all.

The subheading of the feature is also noteworthy: "It's deeply reassuring to know that celebrities have the same body worries as we do". But why is this reassuring? Is it *really* that painful to think that there are other people who are simply better than us (in some respect)? Of course, the answer is often yes. In most areas of life, it is natural to want to be the best, and it can be painful to acknowledge that we are not; that there are other people who are cleverer, wittier, more successful, more eloquent, more athletic, more glamorous, better dressed, better educated, and so on. Once you acknowledge this, what do you do? Change your values? (I never wanted to be clever anyway – damn swots.) Or do you try to pull others down to your level, or to humiliate them somehow, so you feel better about yourself? Or should you just get on with your life?

Of course, even if *Heat* is "fuelled" by *ressentiment*, and even if we consider this a sickness, it is clearly a fairly innocuous example. But it is, nevertheless, illustrative.

Compare the *Heat* reader's attitude to celebrities with the fox's attitudes towards the grapes.

	Fox	<i>Heat</i> reader
Stage one:	Delicious grapes	Glamorous celebs
Stage two:	Out of reach	Out of reach
Stage three:	Sour grapes	Fat celebs Ugly celebs Spotty celebs Sweaty celebs Humiliated celebs
Stage four	I feel so much better	I feel so much better

Just as the fox tells himself that the grapes are sour, the *Heat* readers try to tell themselves that the various glamorous celebrities are not so glamorous and not so beautiful after all. And if they can't manage this, they can at least take delight in the embarrassment or the humiliations of the celebs.

But why should we want to avoid becoming creatures of *ressentiment*? After all, it makes us feel better. As Danto says, the cure may be more painful than the disease. So why would we want the cure? In a sense, one would hope that this question wouldn't even be asked once we have reached this point in the discussion. At this point, one would hope

that it would be clear that we would not like to be creatures of *ressentiment*. After all, the person of *ressentiment* is insincere, resentful, negative, vindictive and vengeful?

But if this is not enough, consider again the three options that are available to the person who recognises that there are others better than him (in some respect).

He can change his values, so that he ceases to value the virtue or skill that he lacks. He could attempt to hinder the progress of others, and try to drag them down to his level. (Or, at least, to take joy in their failures.) He can just get on with his life.

Consider these options in relation to the example given earlier of the student who doesn't do well at school. If he opts for the first option, he may feel better, but he won't *get* better. In fact, of course, he will get worse. Of course, he might say that, given that he doesn't care about academic success, it doesn't matter to him that he is now failing. But, of course, this revaluation is not sincere.

If he opts for the second option, then we have a similar problem. He may feel better, but he won't *get* any better. And, of course, the main objection here is going to be a moral objection. It simply isn't acceptable to interfere with other people in this way, just to make yourself feel better. But, even from a self-interested point of view, it is likely that his life will go better if he concentrates on his own goals, rather than just trying to frustrate other people's.

If he opts for the final option, however, then there is a very good chance that he will not only feel better (in the long term), but he will improve himself in real terms, and will achieve greater success. But note that, when we suggest that he should just get on with his life without worrying about how others are doing, this needn't be taken as a rejection of competition. Indeed, to reject competition might itself look like a revaluation of values based on *ressentiment*. After all, to conclude that you don't care about competition on the grounds that you can't win would look like sour grapes. Instead, the claim is simply that one must *face up to* the unpleasant fact that you cannot always win. But once you have done that, then you can get on with your own life.

Section V

In conclusion, to the extent that we are concerned with interpreting Nietzsche, we must conclude that he is doing moral philosophy of some sort, and not trying to cure the sick. And, judged on its own terms, I have argued that Nietzsche's project fails. If we are concerned with the question of what we can learn from Nietzsche, however, then there is much that we can say, and more of value that we can extract from his work, both concerning moral and prudential ethics. And to a large extent, the two go together, in that we can work from both ends. If we come

to a conclusion regarding prudential ethics – recognising the destructive and distorting influence of *ressentiment* – this should also have the welcome side effect of ridding our *moral* judgements of the same distortions. And, likewise, in doing moral philosophy, when we realise that we lack grounds for particular moral judgements, this may be the first step in identifying our own "sickness".

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