

Nietzsche on herd morality and the critique of 'modern ideas'

This handout follows the handouts on 'The will to power' and 'Master and slave morality'. You should read those handouts first.

HERD MORALITY

Nietzsche objects to herd morality because it values what does not have value. It is in the interests of lower, not higher men. If each person's values help establish favourable conditions for themselves, then the triumph of herd morality will lead to the continuation of herd-like people. It is therefore not something for the human race as a whole to live by.

Herd morality is a development of the original slave morality which inherits most of its content, including a reinterpretation of various traits: impotence becomes goodness of heart, craven fear becomes humility, submission becomes 'obedience', cowardice and being forced to wait become patience, the inability to take revenge becomes forgiveness, the desire for revenge becomes a desire for justice, a hatred of one's enemy becomes a hatred of injustice (*Genealogy of Morals* I §14). Happiness is opposed to suffering; pity v. indifference to suffering; peacefulness v. danger; altruism v. self-love; equality v. inequality; communal utility v. endangering such utility; ridding oneself of instincts v. enjoyment of instinctual satisfaction; well-being of the soul v. well-being of the body.

This morality values what has no intrinsic value, and very often endangers what is of much greater value, viz. human greatness. Greatness requires suffering, danger, self-love, inequality, it goes against what is in the interests of people in general and is an expression of instinctual energy. 'Well-being' in herd morality limits human beings, promoting people who are modest, submissive and conforming. And so it opposes the development of higher people, it slanders their will to power and labels them evil. Belief in its values limits people who could become higher people, leading them to self-doubt and self-loathing (§269).

Nietzsche calls this morality both clever (or shrewd) and stupid (§198). It contains and controls powerful instinctual emotions and drives. This is shrewd because these are dangerous to a herd person, who does not have a strong enough will to control their own emotions or stand up to others'. But it is stupid, because it is based on misunderstanding and fear and opposes the development of higher people. The deep fear of other people also undermines herd morality's own values. Fear means then there can be no genuine neighbourly love (§201). We do not and cannot practice altruism, but our moral values require us to believe in it

As herd morality as developed, it seems to have lost that element that belonged to the ascetic ideal. It becomes a form of utilitarianism, aimed at happiness in this world, rather than redemption in the next. But with the loss of the ascetic ideal, there is nothing to inspire people to try to become better, greater, by overcoming their weaknesses or

finding a creative, powerful responses to their resentment. Nietzsche praises Christianity for the greatness in art and architecture, for the depths of the soul, it produced. Without the ascetic ideal, we lose this, and morality is no longer a form of self-overcoming, and people become 'smaller', less great.

Above all, herd morality has led to the degeneration of the human race (§62). We are not a species of animal that has fully developed into what it can be, because we keep alive 'a surplus of deformed, sick, degenerating, frail' people, which 'ought to perish'. Christianity has bred a mediocre, sickly, good-natured animal.

DEMOCRACY AND PITY

By 'modern ideas', Nietzsche means what we might call 'secular humanism'. 'Modern ideas' include the values of democracy and equality, a work ethic, a morality that opposes suffering, and beliefs in science and positivism (the view that philosophy should limit itself to what is 'given' in experience and the study of scientific methodology). Nietzsche criticises these values and argues that they originate in religion, even though most people of 'modern ideas' claim to be 'atheists'.

Democracy is founded on the value of equality – that all people are equal and so should have an equal say in how society is run. Yet the idea of equality should be more contentious than it has become. Samuel Johnson said 'So far is it from being true that men are naturally equal, that no two people can be half an hour together, but one shall acquire an evident superiority over the other' (Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Vol. 1, p. 318). If inequality is so easily established, what does our belief in equality rest upon?

Equality and democracy are instincts of 'the herd' (§202), values that favour the unexceptional and mediocre. They do not recognise and respect the exceptional. In this, democrats, anarchists and socialists, even if they are atheists, uphold the values of Christianity. They all want a 'free' society of equals, i.e. a society of an autonomous herd, and believe the community will save humanity. The elimination of suffering is the foundation of their morality, which they think of as objective. They cannot recognise its perspectival nature.

When Nietzsche condemns pity, he is not suggesting we should be heartless. He isn't talking about refusing to give food to someone hungry. He opposes pity as the basis of morality, because pity seeks to eliminate suffering, which is the origin of greatness. First, pity wrongly preserves the weak and prevents people from becoming stronger through suffering. Second, pity demeans both the person who is shown pity and the person who shows it. The pitied person is shown to lack power, and their self-respect will be undermined; so pity brings them more suffering. The person who shows pity suffers for the suffering of the other person – again, doubling suffering. And they show a lack of self-respect, as pity asserts a false equality, that 'you and I' suffer together. Third, human beings inevitably suffer, so pity's attempt to alleviate all suffering sets itself against life. Finally, pity sees individuals as valuable, but, Nietzsche has argued, the goal of humankind lies in its highest specimens. Nietzsche's pity does not focus on 'social welfare', but on how the human race as a whole has been reduced, prevented from greatness, by values of a morality of pity (§225).

WORK ETHIC, ATHEISM, AND FALSE 'FREE SPIRITS'

Another 'modern idea' is the work ethic (work is morally good and makes us better people). This destroys time for self-examination and reflection. Because a religious life requires this time (§58) (as does the new philosophy), the work ethic contributes to atheism. Believers in 'modern ideas' are liable to feel superior to religion, but they completely fail to understand it. They don't understand whether they should treat it as work or leisure, their minds have become so narrow in its categories of understanding. But they seek to be 'tolerant', while actually avoiding the pain of real tolerance. They fail to show the proper reverence for what is of real value, feeling as if they have the right to investigate, touch, everything; they lack shame, (§263). Nietzsche, even as he attacks religion, has enormous regard for it, so he has no respect for people who reject religion thoughtlessly.

Thinkers who 'freed' themselves from the dogmas of religion and advocated a secular humanism thought of themselves as 'free spirits' – turning over past conceptions of right and wrong, advocating a new basis for society. But Nietzsche argues that they are merely continuing the work of religion under a new guise (§44), supporting the further domination of 'herd' values and undermining the conditions necessary for human greatness. By contrast, the new philosophers see that humankind is degenerating; they see 'the fate that lies hidden in the stupid innocence and blissful confidence of "modern ideas"' (§203).

SCIENCE AND POSITIVISM

Nietzsche does not criticise science, but scientism, a faith in science as the ultimate source of knowledge and solutions to the problems of life and suffering. Science does not genuinely explain the world (§14), but only describes it. This is accepted and applauded by positivism as all we can do. We are convinced by science because it agrees with the popular idea that we can only clearly know about what we can see and touch. But while Nietzsche agrees, he argues that we must treat the evidence of our senses cautiously, as all our experience is shot through with our values. Believers in science and positivism fail to recognise this; as with their morality, they think that scientific knowledge is unconditional and objective. For example, they do not recognise the connection between the scientific idea of 'laws of nature' and their commitment to the values of democracy and equality (§22).

And so science cannot replace philosophy for two reasons. First, it is philosophy that establishes the truth of perspectivism; the perspective of science is a foreground perspective that fails to acknowledge itself as a perspective. Second, science incorporates values but cannot create or dictate values. This is the job of the new philosophers. Science, then, is a tool in the service of new philosophers. Believers in 'modern ideas' elevate science above its proper position.

DISCUSSION

We see in §62 an explicit statement of what Nietzsche's rejection of herd morality requires, and therefore the task faced by the new philosopher in raising the human race to a higher level: many people must be allowed to die, as 'failed' human beings. This is not an application of Darwinian evolution, because what counts as a 'failure' for Nietzsche is a 'success' in Darwinian terms. In evolutionary theory, success is a matter of

reproduction; but it is the herd who have managed to reproduce most successfully, while higher people are rare.

But why should we reject herd morality and accept the value Nietzsche gives to will to power? One answer, discussed in the handout on 'The will to power', is that life is the will to power, and without life, nothing can be valued – valuing life is valuing the ground of all values. But 'weak' forms of life, the herd, are still life, and even dominate life. So we can coherently value life, and the herd, without valuing the will to power as Nietzsche does.

However, given Nietzsche's criticisms of conventional morality, do we want to value herd values? But suppose we reject these, and even adopt some noble values, This does not mean that people who are herd animals have no value except as a means to creating higher people. This conclusion requires Nietzsche's claim that the goal of humanity lies in its highest specimens.

In the handout on 'Eternal return', we discuss the inconsistency of willing eternal return while feeling contempt for almost everyone who has lived. To will eternal return, we must find value in the 'herd', e.g. that they are alive and will to continue living. Life, in this broader sense, is valuable, even if Nietzsche's narrower sense of life as the vitality that expresses will to power is a valuable development of life.