

# GENEALOGY OF MORALS: THE ASCETIC IDEAL ON KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH



The ascetic ideal is a seemingly self-denying force characterized by “poverty, humility, chastity” (3:8, 108) [1]. It is piety embodied, sensuality restrained. That such an ideology has flourished and recurred (as Nietzsche references with India) throughout societal development is a seeming paradox: the dominant ideal of humanity is a life-denying one. How, or rather why, then, has the ascetic ideal triumphed? Where does it come from? One easy answer is that there were no competing ideals.

This answer, because it is elliptical, ultimately fails to satisfy. For instance: why did no other ideals form? Was it impossible to create an alternative ideal and, if so, why? From these questions, one sees that there must be more at work behind the ascetic ideal, a more convincing reason for its triumph. This reason is “that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void,” and that “the ascetic ideal

offered man meaning," by placing "all suffering under the perspective of guilt" (3:28, 162). This interpretation hinges upon two key conditions: that suffering constitutes a part of being human and that man cannot bear undirected suffering, suffering without a purpose.

The theme of human suffering pervades all three books of the *Genealogy of Morals*. When Nietzsche refers to "the whole herd of the ill-constituted, disgruntled, underprivileged, unfortunate, and all who suffer of themselves," he is not talking about an outcast minority group (3:13, 120). The above herd is led by the ascetic priest, whose life's purpose it is "to exploit the bad instincts of all sufferers for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-overcoming," (3:16, 128) whose "degenerating life" is the source from which sprung the ascetic ideal (3:13, 120). This suffering herd encompasses virtually all of humanity. Additionally, Nietzsche sees progress as impossible without suffering: "Every small step on earth has been paid for by spiritual and physical torture" (3:9, 114). When analyzed on its own, the slave revolt in morality, discussed in the First Essay, can be interpreted as a clever ploy by the Jews to alleviate their earthly suffering by inverting the current value hierarchy. Their invention of heaven, with piety rewarded, turned the prevailing definition of bad, under which they suffered, into good. The point of these examples is clear enough: suffering is a central part of the human condition.

That man suffers is not enough of an initial condition to give rise to the ascetic ideal; man must be driven mad by meaningless suffering. In fact, because man has suffered throughout his history, "he desires it [suffering], he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering" (3:28, 162). Man must be shown such a meaning so

that he has a target at which he can direct his emotions because "the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief" (3:15, 127). While this sort of emotional response may seem the hallmark of revenge, of reactive anger, Nietzsche points out a difference: revenge prevents future suffering but does not explain past suffering or give meaning to it. The release of affects, referred to above by Nietzsche, attacks the source of suffering in a much more fundamental way.

This release which gives meaning to man's suffering must have a target; that is what had been lacking before the ascetic priest offered an explanation for the source of suffering. While every "sickly sheep" (notice the language of the herd) thinks "'I suffer: someone must be to blame for it,'" the ascetic priest finally gives man a source for this blame: "But you alone are to blame for it-you alone are to blame for yourself!" (3:15, 128). Thus the ascetic priest gave all sufferers, which is virtually all man, a meaning for his suffering: guilt. While the ascetic ideal "brought fresh suffering with it, deeper more inward, more poisonous, more life-destructive suffering," it is actually a life-preserving force because, "it placed all suffering under the perspective of guilt" (3:28, 162). If man did not have such a perspective, he would have no target upon which to release his affects and would thus see no meaning to his suffering. Pointless suffering, according to Nietzsche, could be said to be the bane of man's existence: if we suffer continuously and for no apparent reason, we will be driven to a "suicidal nihilism" (3:28, 162). In giving man a meaning for his suffering, the ascetic ideal prevents suicidal nihilism; therefore, while being a seemingly life-denying force (because asceticism's trademark is a lack of sensuality), the ascetic ideal is actually the ultimate life-preserver. For as Nietzsche reminds us multiple times in the Third Essay: the human will "needs a

goal-and it will rather will nothingness than not will" (3:1, 96).

While I earlier contended that there was no alternative ideal to the ascetic one, many would argue that atheism, as the lack of all ideals, appears to be an alternative. But pure atheism, the pure lack of ideals, does not exist among any "free spirits": they still have the will to truth, the constant desire to know and to know objectively. It will later be shown that these spirits are not, in fact, free. Because this will is the backbone of philosophy and science, one might believe that these endeavors are free from asceticism.

The ascetic ideal is at work in philosophy in two ways: in a very literal, although spiritual, sense and as a precondition to philosophy's existence. In the literal sense: "ascetic ideals reveal so many bridges to [physical and metaphysical] *independence* that a philosopher is bound to rejoice" (3:7, 107). The sensual deprivation, the absence of tempting pleasures, that the ascetic ideal produces are highly conducive to the act of philosophizing. One can interpret Descartes' approach in the *Meditations* as the ascetic practice of philosophy taken to its extreme: by withdrawing from society, Descartes would have no distractions blocking his will to truth. In the ascetic ideal, the philosopher finds "an optimum condition for the highest and boldest spirituality" because it entails "freedom from compulsion, disturbance, noise, from tasks, duties, worries," et cetera [2] (3:8, 108). That so many major philosophers have remained unmarried serves as a testament to a fundamental relationship between philosophy and asceticism; viewed as such, Nietzsche regards Socrates' marriage as an intentionally ironical one.

While the ascetic ideal is directly at work in philosophy as

shown above, Nietzsche also shows that "*the ascetic ideal* for a long time served the philosopher as a form in which to appear, as a precondition of existence" (3:10, 115). Nietzsche uses a discussion on the nature of ancient contemplative men to explain why this relationship exists. The most ancient of such men live lives where, "when not feared, they were despised" (3:10, 115). Because the values of ancient society opposed the values of philosophy and its will to truth, a philosopher had to strike fear in others in order to live. By resorting to self-torture, the Brahmins and King Vishvamitra were able to gain power over themselves and their societal conditioning so as to willingly practice philosophy and innovation. From these origins arose contemplative man, the earliest philosopher. Their stories illustrate Nietzsche's point that "the philosophic spirit always had to use as a mask and cocoon the *previously established* types of the contemplative man" (3:10, 115). For modern philosophy, this previously established type was the ascetic ideal. The modern philosopher had to represent the ascetic ideal to avoid continual physical and spiritual torture; to represent the ideal, he had to believe it.

In science, the story is slightly different: it is the exaltation of truth that makes science "*the latest and noblest form*" of the ascetic ideal (3:23, 147). Just as the ascetic ideal is a denying force, so too is science: it denies even the possibility that absolute truth does not exist. While scientists may seem like the ultimate free spirits in that they do not follow the traditional faith of the ascetic ideal, they are in fact constrained by an "unconditional will to truth" that is "faith in a *metaphysical* value, the absolute value of *truth*" (3:24, 151). This faith is in fact the same faith that is behind the ascetic ideal because it is a complete denial. As guilt causes sensual denial in the general form of the ascetic ideal, so does faith in truth cause denial among scientists. While science first appears completely antagonistic to the ascetic ideal, "it opposes and fights, on

closer inspection, not the ideal itself but only its exteriors, its guise and masquerade, its temporary dogmatic hardening and stiffening" (3:25, 153). At its core, science is just another embodiment of the ideal it purports to oppose. Science seems faithless, free from asceticism, but its ardent belief in itself, in its own supreme value, (this belief can be said to be the strongest will to truth) is in fact an ascetic belief.

For many of the purposes of this essay from here on, science and philosophy can be treated as one. They are both related to the ascetic ideal in their will to truth. In Nietzsche's treatment of science, he writes:

these hard, severe, abstinent, heroic spirits who constitute the honor of our age; all these pale atheists, anti-Christians, immoralists, nihilists...these last idealists of knowledge...believe they are as completely liberated from the ascetic ideal as possible, these 'free, very free spirits' (3:24, 148-150)

Above, this belief in liberation was shown false. While philosophy is absent from that long list, as an umbrella discipline, it covers the belief systems above. Like scientists, philosophers are guilty of being "idealists of knowledge" in the sense of possessing a will to truth. While the two disciplines go about searching for truth (and here there is a distinction between truth and knowledge) very differently, they still possess the same will to truth that links their disciplines to the ascetic ideal.

The distinction between truth and knowledge mentioned above is a very important one. Most importantly: "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the *more* complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be" (3:12, 119). From this we see that knowledge is inherently

perspectival. Everything one knows has been influenced by the perspective from which he/she learned it. While this passage may seem to be a defense of relativism, it is in fact not: Nietzsche does not deny that objective truth exists (he does not explicitly affirm it either), but argues that we cannot know it. If we extend the knowledge-as-seeing analogy from the passage, one could say that the object upon which our knowledge gazes is truth in an objective sense. But there are an infinite number of perspectives (affects in Nietzsche's terms) from which to view this truth and thus we can never know an objective truth. Hence the quotation marks around "objectivity." The objectivity he is speaking of is a partial objectivity: by letting more eyes gaze upon a thing, we do learn more about its objective truth than one person alone could, but complete objectivity can never be reached.

From this new conception of knowledge and truth arises a problem with the methods of philosophy and science: the will to truth is a pretension that knowledge is objective truth. These ardent seekers of truth, who exalt truth above all else, fail to acknowledge the perspectival nature of human knowledge. All scientific research, all philosophical inquiry, is driven by the motivations of the respective truth-seekers. Nietzsche refers to this blindness as a "general renunciation of all interpretation," and shows that it, "expresses, broadly speaking, as much ascetic virtue as any denial of sensuality" (3:24, 151). From this angle, one sees the will to truth not just as denial that truth could not exist, but as a denial of other perspectives because scientists and philosophers choose to pretend that what they discover is the Truth. But research yields only knowledge, and in this renunciation of interpretation one denies oneself a more complete picture of reality, a more complete objectivity in the words of the original passage from 3:12.

Nietzsche believes one must try to overcome the ascetic ideal in philosophy and science by calling into question the value

of truth. To do so would mean being honest with ourselves and becoming more self-aware as truth-seekers. To realize that our knowledge is merely one perspective is the first step to overcoming the ascetic ideal. Scientists and philosophers are, to Nietzsche, “weary and played-out people who wrap themselves in wisdom and look ‘objective’” (3:26, 158). They blind themselves into thinking that they are opponents of the ascetic ideal, that they alone can know truth. But being guided by personal motivations, this can never be the case. To properly pursue science is to recognize that what one discovers is only a piece of the picture, one angle of viewing an object.

Raising the idea of such an overcoming, Nietzsche asks the startling question: “[W]hat meaning would *our* whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*?” (3:27, 161). Perhaps our “objectivity” would actually become more objective. Instead of the intense competition that is found in academic and industrial research, this self-awareness could create a sense of collaboration among all truth-seekers in the world. To fight amongst scientists and philosophers is to rob oneself of other perspectives, to deny oneself more knowledge of the object (since one person alone cannot possess an objective truth), to succumb to the ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche quotes his book *Gay Science*: “[W]e men of knowledge of today, we godless men and anti-metaphysicians, we, too, still derive *our* flame from the fire ignited by a faith millennia old, the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*” (3:25, 152). While it is hard for many of us, especially at a research university like Johns Hopkins, to deny the divinity of truth, overcoming the ascetic ideal and accepting the value of knowledge for what it truly is might actually ignite that flame more. If one research group cannot truly know the nature of its object, then all of human knowledge today is but a small, small slice



of objectivity. We still have a long way to go.