

Nietzsche, Nihilism and What to do Next

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The purpose of this essay is to introduce the idea that what Nietzsche teaches us about morality, particularly regarding the picture of morality he gives us in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (henceforth GM) can substantiate arguments against meta-ethical realism. The realist holds that our moral judgements are propositions, some of which are true. Therefore, any argument for anti-realism needs to demonstrate that either our moral judgements are not propositional, or that they are always false. I do not think that Nietzsche can help us to argue the former: Nietzsche thinks his etymology of moral terms in GM is an important revelation partly because when we do employ these moral predicates we take ourselves to be saying something that can be true. This cannot be the case if our moral judgements are not assertoric. Illuminating what Nietzsche's important revelation about morality in GM consists in will be the subject of Section One.

What I will argue, however, is that Nietzsche can support the anti-realist claim that none of our moral judgements are true. I will elucidate in Section Two what I think we can gain from this conclusion: that Nietzsche is best read as an error theorist regarding our moral discourse up till now. In Section Three, I will look at what kind of positive account for the future of morality we can gain from Nietzsche's work. Finally, in Section Four, I will examine the notion of moral truth Nietzsche's positive picture leaves us with and whether it is compatible with my conclusion that Nietzsche's position is essentially anti-realist.

Section One: Anti-realism and Nietzsche's First Essay of GM

In the First Essay of GM Nietzsche gives us an etymology of our moral predicates as a pair of dichotomies: 'good and bad' and 'good and evil' in terms

of their coinage and use as tools in a social power struggle between master and slave moralities. Master morality is the morality of the ‘nobles’ or ruling classes who “first claimed the right to create values and give these values names” (GM: I: 2). This creation of values is the assertion of their authority over the ‘slave herd’: as Nietzsche tells us, this “feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind ... is the origin of the antithesis ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (*ibid.*).

The slave herd’s response to this dictation of values was an unhealthy psychological attitude that Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. Out of *ressentiment*, the slave herd formed their concept of ‘evil’ as whatever the nobles called ‘good’ and their concept of ‘good’ as anything that the nobles called ‘bad’. Although, as Nietzsche tells us, “there is still no lack of places where the battle remains undecided” (GM: I: 16), he concludes that it is slave morality that has “been dominant for a long time” (*ibid.*). What I think Nietzsche has observed is a common feature of how moralities develop which applies, at least on some basic level, to all kinds of societies and communities¹. The pattern is that wherever there is a group of people there is leadership which in turn implies a division between leaders and followers and from this divide emerges conflict.

What does this picture of morality as a multitude of conflicts between master and slave values teach us about morality in general? My argument is that the import for meta-ethical debate is a form of argument for anti-realism. In this section, I will invoke Sinhababu's work which offers us a debunking argument against the moral realist’s belief in the existence of moral properties and which employs some of Nietzsche’s ideas in GM.

It is a fundamental tenet of moral naturalistic² realism (the kind of

¹Nietzsche’s target is often taken to be just European morality because it has come from Christianity (he tells us that the struggle began in Rome). However, Nietzsche also mentions Jewish and Chinese morality and that the Christian influence has spread ‘over nearly half the earth’ (GM: I: 16). Clearly, the problem is more than just Europe-wide.

²I do not have sufficient space to attempt an attack, using Nietzsche’s ideas,

realism I will address in this essay) that there are moral properties which are part of the fabric of the world and which make our moral judgements true. For the realist, the truth of the moral judgement obtains if and only if the constituent moral predicates refer to some corresponding state of affairs, some objective fact of the matter. Therefore, if what Nietzsche gives us is a form of anti-realism on metaphysical grounds then part of what Nietzsche can teach us is that the realist's belief in the existence of moral properties is unjustified. Sinhababu offers the following 'Unreliability Argument' against the belief that moral properties exist:

- (P1): Our beliefs in moral properties were caused by a historical process that is unreliable in generating true belief.
- (P2): We know whether an unreliable historical process caused our belief in moral properties.
- (P3): Beliefs that we know to be caused by unreliable historical processes are unjustified.
- (C): We are not justified in believing that moral properties exist.

Sinhababu suggests that the First Essay of GM can substantiate P1 and P2 and thus get us to an anti-realist conclusion. Nietzsche has told us that slave values came out of their feeling of resentment against the nobles which, according to Sinhababu, yields an unreliable historical process. Since these values have "been dominant for a long time" (GM: I: 16) we might then want to say that a history of moral beliefs and attitudes that is driven by such forces as resentment is ill-suited to generate true beliefs.

I agree that part of what Nietzsche teaches us in GM is that our moral beliefs are unreliable, because they come from a history in which values were created and used as tools in a power struggle between master and slave moralities. However, I do not think that Nietzsche is necessarily concerned with

on non-naturalistic realism as well. However, I refer the reader to the wealth of objections against Moore's *Open Question Argument* for reasons why one ought not to be a non-naturalist realist either.

the unreliability of our belief in the existence of moral properties. Rather, he demonstrates the unreliability of the realist belief that our moral predicates could uniquely refer to such moral properties.

If Nietzsche's account in GM highlights a genuine feature of morality, then we are no longer justified in thinking that our moral judgements can be true in the realist sense. 'X is good' would be true for the moral realist if and only if 'good' here refers to some corresponding state of affairs. But Nietzsche tells us that part of what we mean by 'good' here is inherited from a history in which values were created for a purpose other than to aim at objective truth. Thus Nietzsche shows us that the belief that our moral predicates can pick out properties and thus be constituents of true moral judgements is unreliable³.

To conclude my arguments thus far: in GM Nietzsche highlights a recurring feature of the origin of moralities which applies to all kinds of moral communities. The import for meta-ethics is that we have reason to reject the realist idea that some of our moral judgements are true because the meaning of our moral terms in part arises from their history as human constructs, hence they do not just refer to some objective property. Thus, according to the realist, they come out as false. On this basis, Nietzsche gives us good reason to be anti-realists. Next, I will explore exactly what kind of anti-realism Nietzsche gives us.

Section Two: Nietzsche and Error Theory

Sinhababu suggests that we could read Nietzsche as an *error theorist* about moral judgements⁴ (Sinhababu, 2007, footnote 1). Undeniably, the

³That said, outside of his arguments in GM, Nietzsche does give us good reason to think that there are no moral properties: in *The Gay Science* and *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche tells us that the nature of value is such that it just cannot be part of the material world. I will explore this claim in the next section.

⁴According to Sinhababu, this is not an anachronistic claim, as a form of error theory is traceable as far back as Parmenides who argued that all talk of change is in error.

conclusion of my previous discussion is similar to the conclusion that J. L. Mackie reaches in his *Ethics* that, as things stand, all of our moral judgements come out as false. By drawing parallels between Nietzsche's and Mackie's work, I hope to illuminate the plausibility of reading Nietzsche as an error theorist.

Mackie's *Error Theory* argues for anti-realism on both semantic and metaphysical grounds. According to Mackie, the semantic point is that when we make a moral judgement we mean that there are values which exist independently of us. These values are capable of motivating us irrespective of our own psychological states. However, Mackie tells us, no such values could possibly exist. This is Mackie's *Argument from Queerness*: any value with the power to motivate our normative judgements is too 'metaphysically queer' to be part of the world. Therefore, our moral judgements are systematically false because their truth-makers, these objective values that we posit, cannot exist.

Although Nietzsche does not explicitly give us an Argument from Queerness, he does make it clear that value just isn't something that can be part of the natural world. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche tells us that "Nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time ... and it was we who gave it" (GS: 301). Also in *Human, All too Human* Nietzsche says that 'the moral man ... supposes that what he has essentially at heart must also constitute the essence and heart of things' (HH: 4). In this section, Nietzsche compares our idea that our values have some objective place in the world with the way that astrologers read our fate into the movement of celestial objects. In both cases we read our own ideas into objects but these ideas do not actually belong to these objects. Mackie and Nietzsche share a premise of thought here: values cannot be part of the material world as actual 'properties' but rather belong to the human sphere⁵. Thus we would be wrong to think that our moral discourse can refer to some actual property of the world which exists independently of us. For this

⁵This argument also applies to things like aesthetic value, which Nietzsche admits. This is often raised as an objection against Mackie's theory as it seems that error theory disposes of too much.

reason our moral discourse, as it stands, is in error.

Another parallel between Mackie and Nietzsche lies in the fact that they both observe, as part of their diagnosis of moral discourse as erroneous, that there is no singular type of morality. Mackie's *Argument from Relativity* begins with an empirical claim that there is substantive disagreement among existing ethical codes. Similarly in *Beyond Good and Evil* (henceforth BGE) Nietzsche tells us that "the real problems of morality ... emerge only when we compare many moralities" (BGE: 186).

What can we learn from this observation? The realist can reply that moral disagreement among different ethical codes just represents different perspectives, some objectively right and others wrong. However, Mackie argues that the best explanation of pervasive moral disagreement is not that the moral judgements of some groups are mistaken. Rather, our observation shows us that different judgements reflect participation in different ways of life. Mackie argues that the "causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy" (Mackie, 1977, 36). We find a similar explanation of the origin of values in the First Essay of GM. The nobles created their values based on how they already lived. Being 'the powerful', 'the rich' and 'the truthful', as they saw themselves, became what they called 'good' (GM: I: 5). The values of slave morality also emerged out of how they lived so that they came to see their way of life as 'good' and the values of their rulers as 'evil'. Both Mackie and Nietzsche explain that people value different traits and actions in accordance with how they live.

What I have given, I hope, is a sufficient exposition of the parallels between Mackie and Nietzsche's arguments to conclude that what Nietzsche gives us is a kind of error theory: our moral judgements always come out false and therefore our moral discourse, in aiming at objectivity, is erroneous. The

next question is: what can be salvaged for morality after we have arrived at this sceptical conclusion?

Section Three: Nietzsche's Positive Account

Mackie tells us that "morality is not to be discovered, but to be made" (Mackie, 1977, 106). I think this is a proposal that Nietzsche would agree with⁶. In this section I will look at Nietzsche's ideas about the future of morality. Nietzsche's ideas amount to a constructivist picture in which individuals create their own value systems. My conclusion that Nietzsche's positive account is constructivist is drawn from two recurring themes in his works: *perspectivism* and *will to power*. I will look at *perspectivism* first.

We find an example of perspectivism in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*: "the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that man does, and the question of which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct one is quite meaningless" (TL p.86). As with Mackie's *Argument from Relativity* we cannot move from the judgment that two perspectives are different to the judgment that one is objectively right and the other wrong. This in mind, Blackburn argues that Mackie's move from this observation about perspectives to error has a missing premise: that the various perspectives "are all equally good, or equally 'no fault'". Blackburn tells us this "only has to be stated to seem wrong" (Blackburn, 2007, 284). This missing premise is one that I think Nietzsche would accept: it is meaningless to ask whose perspective is more correct "for this would have to be decided by the standard of correct perception ... which is not available" (TL p.86). Without a standard of comparison, all perspectives are "equally good, or equally no fault." Nietzsche concludes from the observation that there exists a multitude of different

⁶Mackie later describes how we ought to 'decide what moral views to adopt' (ibid.) It is at this point, I think, that Mackie and Nietzsche's solutions to moral scepticism diverge. From his discussion in GBE of how idiosyncratic philosophers' moral systems are I don't think Nietzsche would want us to cherry-pick our values from conventional normative theories.

perspectives that there is no objective standard: “there are many kinds of eyes ... and consequently there are many kinds of 'truths', and consequently there is no truth” (WP 540).

I now turn to Nietzsche’s concept of will to power. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche tells us that “the criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power” (WP: 534). What exactly does Nietzsche mean by *will to power*? As I take it, it is a kind of driving force in all humans which motivates a strong sense of individualism and ambition. An early conception of this can be found in *The Gay Science*: ‘Benefiting and hurting others are ways of exercising one’s power upon others’ (GS: 3).

So far *will to power* sounds aggressive and selfish; so why would Nietzsche see it as a positive alternative to the value systems we have held up till now? I suggest that the move to individualism marks a radical departure from the herd morality of GM: “Every choice human strives instinctively for a citadel ... where he is saved from the crowd, the many, the great majority” (BGE 26). There is also evidence in BGE that Nietzsche wants the will to power to be a central theme in the morality of the future as he describes our need for strong-willed philosophers “to teach man the future of man as his will” and bring about a ‘revaluation of values’ (BGE: 203).

We can make sense of this patchwork of ideas if we bring together the themes of perspectivism and will to power. The upshot is something of a constructivist picture of morality: it is down to the individual to create their values as they will: “we want to be the poets of our life” (GS 299)⁷. This conception of morality is anti-realist because it maintains there is no fact of the matter about how one ought to construct one’s values; this can vary from person to person and this variation is unproblematic. The lack of an objective standard does not mean that none of these values can be ‘true’ because values no longer attempt to refer to some moral property in the natural world. What is ‘true’ in

⁷ See Reginster: *The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity*.

this context simply means what is true for the individual.

One might then ask if this is a viable notion of truth. If all previous moral talk was in error, surely Nietzsche's proposed alternative needs to involve a satisfactory kind of moral truth in order to be superior to what we had before? What kind of moral truth can Nietzsche offer us here?

Section Four: How Truth Functions in Nietzsche's Positive Account

I ended Section Three asking what kind of truth we are left with in Nietzsche's positive account for morality. If values are perspectival and thus true as far as they are true for the individual, then there is some notion of truth at play. I suggest that 'truth' here is best characterised as a kind of coherence conception of truth: the truth of a proposition consists in how it coheres with a given set of propositions. In this case, the truth of an individual's moral judgement consists in whether or not it coheres with their individual set of values, and nothing else.

If Nietzsche endorses a coherence theory of truth to explain how truth functions when we use moral terms, however, this may present an objection to my account of Nietzsche as an anti-realist. If we no longer consider truth to depend on whether or not our beliefs correspond to a state of affairs in the world, then it seems we must say that an individual's belief in their own values cannot be true. But then some of our moral judgements can be true it seems that Nietzsche is now siding with the moral realist.

My response is that there is nothing contradictory about accepting both that Nietzsche has a kind of coherence conception of truth and that he is an anti-realist because the coherence conception of truth just isn't one that the realist accepts. According to the realist, the truth of a moral judgement obtains if, and only if, the constituent moral predicates refer to some corresponding state of affairs in the world. As I argued in Section One, Nietzsche shows us that this is a criterion that cannot be satisfied. In Section Three we saw how Nietzsche gives us an alternative picture of how truth functions in morality. Thus, we have seen

how Nietzsche attacks both the realist conception of truth as correspondence⁸ and the realist's claim that there are moral judgements that are true in virtue of satisfying this criterion.

The next question is whether we can accept this conception of truth. Nietzsche's positive account of morality leaves us with a subjective notion of truth: true is just what is true for the individual. There is no objective fact of the matter so this is no longer 'truth' in the realist sense, but is this notion of truth defensible?

I think it is. Nietzsche tells us that a collection of different perspectives, seen together, can give us a clearer view on a matter: "the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be" (GM III: 12). 'Objectivity' here just means the broadest possible conception that we can have from a human viewpoint, as opposed to a 'view from nowhere'⁹. Once we step back and look at the diversity of perspectives altogether, we can witness this kind of intersubjective truth. This way, we can have a better idea of what moral truth consists in if we 'compare many moralities' (BGE: 186). This is a conception of truth that the anti-realist can make sense of. We can build a picture of how morality functions by observing the various existing perspectives but there is no fact of the matter regarding how each perspectival value-set ought to be constructed.

Conclusion

I have argued that Nietzsche's etymology of our moral terms in GM highlights a feature of morality which shows that our moral judgements fail to pick out moral properties in the world, as the naturalist realist claims they do.

⁸For further evidence of this, see Nietzsche's comments that truth is 'a movable host of metaphors ...' (TL p.84).

⁹I take this idea from Nagel: we can never achieve a fully objective understanding of anything (a view from nowhere) because as we move towards an increasingly objective view-point, we always retain our own perspective, along with all the subjective perspectives which our view encompasses.

Rather, our moral terms, at least in part, refer to their origins as tools in a power struggle between master and slave moralities. As a result, all of our moral judgements, as far as they purport to correspond to reality, come out as false on realist terms.

This conclusion is remarkably similar to the conclusion Mackie comes to for his Error Theory. As any error theorist does, Nietzsche needs to offer us a positive account for morality going forward. This can be gathered from various comments across his works on perspectivism and the will to power. The result is a picture in which morality is a matter of an individual's perspective: values are created for the individual, by the individual. Such values are true as far as they cohere with the individual's belief-set.

Although Nietzsche has shown objective moral truth to be unattainable, what we can have is a kind of intersubjective truth, which is achieved once we take a step back and observe together the variety of moral systems we have. This conception of 'truth' is one that the moral realist would reject, but given that Nietzsche rejected their criterion of truth, I think that this is the best that Nietzsche can offer the anti-realist with regards to 'truth' in morality.

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