

Reading questions for Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)

Notice that Nietzsche gives us the topic of each essay in its title. If you lose track of the argument, look back at those titles to remind yourself of what he's trying to establish.

Preface

1. Nietzsche tells us that he has come to regard “the inexorable progress of the morality of compassion” as “the most sinister symptom of the sinister development of our European culture...toward nihilism” (§5, p. 7). After you've read the work, come back and see whether you can explain what he means. What does he conclude is the “value” of compassion?

First Essay: ‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’

1. Nietzsche claims that an etymology (the study of the history of words) of the concept of the “good” points to its true origins. What does this original concept of the good involve, and with what social group is it associated? (§2-5) (Don't bother getting lost in the details of his etymology.)

2. The “priestly caste” makes its first appearance here. (It will put in another, much longer appearance in the third essay.) What is its role? What does Nietzsche have to say about the Jews in this connection? (§7) What do you make of those comments?

3. If the priests are so dangerous, then why does Nietzsche say that their work has turned us into “interesting” animals, and that they gave the human soul “depth?” (§6-7)

4. What is the “slave revolt in morals,” and what does it have to do with what he calls “*ressentiment*?” (What is *ressentiment*, anyway?) What happens to the morality of the noble races as a result? (§10-12)

5. Try to sum up what Nietzsche is saying about the difference between the value pairs “good/bad” and “good/evil.” What has happened as a result of the struggle between them? (§13-16)

6. If the slave revolt in morals has been so harmful, then why does he claim that “today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of the ‘*higher nature*,’ of the more spiritual nature, than to be divided against oneself in this sense and to remain a battleground for these oppositions?” (§16)

Second Essay: ‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and Related Matters

1. Here Nietzsche shifts his attention to the long history, most of which lies in prehistory, of how “bad conscience” and “guilt” arose. How does he explain them? What do they have to do with the relations of creditors and debtors?

2. Like “bad conscience,” he claims, “the whole murky affair which goes by the name of thought,” including “reason, seriousness, [and] mastery over the emotions” has been achieved at the price of “blood and horror” (§3-4). What do you make of this argument? Is he exposing something? or is he praising it? (§7)

3. How do the “joys of cruelty” and of punishment relate to the morality of nobles in the first essay? What does this essay add to that earlier discussion?

4. What is the “will to power,” and how does it differ from the Darwinian principle of adaptation? (§12) Nietzsche provocatively asserts that “the mass of humanity sacrificed to the flourishing of a single *stronger* species of man--now that would be progress.” What are the implications of this?

5. Nietzsche calls bad conscience “a deep sickness.” Why? (§16) Why is Christianity the “utmost” form of this sickness? (§20-22)

6. If bad conscience is such a deep sickness, then how do you explain Nietzsche’s claim that through it “our whole inner world...has acquired depth, breadth, and height,” all of which are signs of something “pregnant with the future?” (§16; go back and look at Qs 3 and 6 for the first essay)

Third Essay: What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?

1. The priestly caste is back, in the person of the ascetic priest. First, make sure you know what asceticism is and what Nietzsche means by it.

2. The ascetic priest *appears* to represent a life-denying repression of the instincts, but in reality is the agent and the embodiment of the will to power. Explain.

3. §14 consists of a long rant about what Nietzsche sees as a pervasive “struggle of the sick against the healthy.” What do you make of it?

4. The ascetic priest “changes the direction of *ressentiment*.” (§15) What does this mean in psychological terms? in social terms?

5. Part of the ascetic priest’s achievement is to radically enhance the human capacity for “perspectival seeing.” (§12) How is this connected to the issues raised by questions 3 and 6 about the first essay, and question 6 about the second essay?

6. “Christianity *as dogma* was destroyed by its own morality; in this way, Christianity *as morality* must now be destroyed--we are standing on the threshold of *this* very event.” (§27) Destroyed in the name of what opposing value?