FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
Master and Slave Morality

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher and philologist who lived from 1844 to 1900, wrote voluminously on socio-cultural issues. He is widely recognized as an astute critic of many of the main currents of nineteenth-century thinking. Using trenchant prose and powerful wit, he savagely attacked ideals of piety, progress, compassion, and scientific rigor. His criticisms have had a profound impact on continental thinkers, such as Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault, and Derrida.

Nietzsche claims that Christianity gave rise to a bourgeois civilization that inculcated unquestioning conformism and resentment against the powerful. Inspired by Darwinian theories of evolution, he argues that nature endows us— as it does animals— with a will to power that, if unimpeded by repression, drives us to individualist displays of strength and even cruelty. He urges the development of a noble morality that allows such urges to assert themselves as we regain our authentic lives.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether Nietzsche is merely giving an interesting— and possibly ironic— criticism of some of the cultural norms of his society, or whether he is in fact proposing a normative view of how all humans ought to act.

The will to power

[257] Every elevation of the type “man” has been the work of an aristocratic society— a society believing in gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings, and requiring slavery in some form. Let us acknowledge how every higher civilization has originated! Men with a natural nature, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, still in possession of unbroken strength of will and desire for power, threw themselves upon weaker, more moral, more peaceful races. The noble caste was always the barbarian caste; their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychical power— they were more complete men (which implies “more complete beasts”).

[259] To refrain mutually from injury, from violence, from exploitation, and put one’s will on a par with that of others; this may result in good
conduct among individuals when the necessary conditions are given (namely, the actual similarity of the individuals in amount of force and degree of worth, and their co-relation within one organization). As soon, however, as one wished to take this principle more generally, and even as the fundamental principle of society, it would immediately disclose what it really is—namely, a Will to the denial of life, a principle of dissolution and decay. Here one must think profoundly and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is essentially injury, conquest of the weak, and exploitation. Life is precisely Will to Power.

People rave everywhere about coming conditions of society in which “the exploiting character” is to be absent; that sounds to my ears as if they promised a mode of life which should refrain from all organic functions. “Exploitation” does not belong to a depraved, or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the nature of the living being as a primary organic function; it is a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life. As a theory this is a novelty— as a reality it is the fundamental fact of all history: let us be honest towards ourselves!

Master morality

[260] There is master-morality and slave-morality. The distinctions of moral values have either originated in a ruling caste, or among the ruled class.

In the first case, when it is the rulers who determine the conception “good,” it is the exalted, proud disposition which determines the order of rank. The noble type of man separates from himself the beings in whom the opposite of this exalted disposition displays itself: he despises them. In this first kind of morality, the antithesis “good” and “bad” means practically the same as “noble” and “despicable”; the antithesis “good” and “evil” is of a different origin. The cowardly, the timid, the insignificant, and those thinking merely of narrow utility are despised.

The noble type of man regards himself as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgment: “What is injurious to me is injurious in itself”; he knows that it is he himself only who confers honor on things; he is a creator of values. He honors whatever he recognizes in himself: such morality is self-glorification. There is the feeling of plenitude, of power, which seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would give and bestow: the noble man also helps the unfortunate, but not out of pity, but rather from an impulse generated by the super-abundance of power.

The noble and brave who think thus are the furthest removed from the morality which sees in sympathy, or in acting for the good of others, the characteristic of the moral.

A morality of the ruling class is especially foreign to present-day taste: in its principle that one has duties only to one’s equals; that one may act towards beings of a lower rank just as seems good to one, or “as the heart desires,” and in any case “beyond good and evil.”

Slave morality

It is otherwise with the second type of morality, slave-morality. Supposing that the oppressed, the suffering, the weary, should moralize, what will be the common element in their moral estimates? Probably a pessimistic suspicion with regard to the situation of man will find expression. The slave has an unfavorable eye for the virtues of the powerful. On the other hand, those qualities which serve to alleviate the existence of sufferers are brought into prominence; it is here that sympathy, the helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility, and friendliness attain to honor for here these are the most useful qualities, and almost the only means of supporting the burden of existence.

Slave-morality is the morality of utility. Here is the seat of the origin of the famous antithesis “good” and “evil”: power and dangerousness are assumed to reside in the evil. According to slave-morality, the “evil” man arouses fear; according to master-morality, it is precisely the “good” man who arouses fear. According to the servile mode of thought, the good man must be the safe man: he is good-natured, easily deceived, perhaps a little stupid.

[262] The mediocre alone have a prospect of continuing and propagating themselves—they will be the men of the future, the sole survivors. “Be like them! Become mediocre!” is now the only morality which has still a significance, which still obtains a hearing. But it is difficult to preach this morality of mediocrity! It can never avow what it is and what it desires!—it will have difficulty in concealing its irony.

The noble Superman

[265] Egoism belongs to the essence of a noble soul. I mean the unalterable belief that to a being such as “we,” other beings must naturally be in subjection, and have to sacrifice themselves. The noble soul accepts the fact of his egoism without question, as something that may have its basis in the primary law of things: he would say: “It is justice itself.” He acknowledges that there are other equally privileged ones; as soon as he has settled this question of rank, he moves among those equals and equally privileged ones with the same assurance, as regards modesty and delicate respect, which he enjoys in intercourse with himself. It is an additional instance of his egoism, this
6. Can there be more than one superman? If so, how would they interact with each other?

7. What features of religion does Nietzsche highlight? What features does he ignore?

For further study


Most of the readings in this anthology support some sort of equality or concern for others, and thus would contrast with Nietzsche; see especially Brandt, Mill, Singer, and Smart (who defend various forms of utilitarianism); Hume (who sees sympathetic as playing a large role in morality); Ross (who defends duties against injury); King (who criticizes segregation on the basis of love; thy-neighbor); and Hertzler (who stresses that the golden rule was historically supported by people from all classes of society, including the aristocratic class). Also, see Lewis and Ricoeur, both of whom write about the connection between ethics and religion, and the Bible selections, which give the orientation that Nietzsche is criticizing.

Note

1. Nietzsche here rejects ancient Greek Epicureanism, which saw pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the goal of life.