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A Family Tree: Nietzsche's Genealogy in Foucault

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Morality and sexuality have become structures so ingrained in and common to our understanding of modern society that questions rarely arise concerning the purpose they serve or the roles that they play within our lives. To us, these ideas simply exist without debate or contention; we are raised to believe certain facts or hold specific opinions concerning these subjects and those views (far too often) become the end of it. Thankfully, this generality does not apply to the occasional "madman" of society who is able to escape the accepted and traditional views of his age and challenge notions commonly assumed to be fact. The nineteenth century philosopher Frederick Nietzsche and the twentieth century historian Michel Foucault were two such madmen who, through their unique approaches to each of these subjects respectively, applied revolutionary new methods of analysis that have changed the way we understand morality and sexuality.

In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche pioneered a new mode of philosophical thought concerned with tracing and understanding the development of societal conceptions of morality. In his On the

Genealogy of Morality, Nietzsche endeavors to examine the value of morality itself. His process is to dissect the "conditions and circumstances under which [these] values grew up, developed and changed" in an attempt to better understand how certain values came to be appropriated with their modern meaning and significance (GM 1. 393). Nietzsche takes the reader through a unique and, at that time, un-attempted historical survey of Christian thought that critically engages common ideals (such as Good and Evil or Guilt) using an interdisciplinary analysis aimed at finding their roots and tracing the development of their significance throughout the ages. This methodological "trace" is the process that Nietzsche has fittingly termed his genealogical approach. Like our usual understanding of the term "genealogy", the method Nietzsche employs is an attempt to trace the ancestry of certain ideas and structures in society that have complex roots systems and paths of influence stretching into the past.

Almost a century later, Foucault, an ideological descendent of Nietzsche's, employed a similar method in his critique of the previously accepted view of sexual repression.

Like Nietzsche, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* applies a history based analysis that integrates numerous other fields of study into a critique of the normative view of human sexuality's role in social functioning. While Nietzsche enacted his genealogical approach in order to achieve a more comprehensive picture of Judeo-Christian morality, Foucault uses genealogy as a means of deconstructing the traditional view of sex in Victorian society and reconstructing a new view of sexuality that pivots on the theory of discourses. Drawing from history, philosophy, psychology, biology, philology, sociology, and many other disciplines, the two analyses employed throughout these works bear remarkable similarities. However, before any comparison between the two bodies can be made, it is first necessary to see how each author applies the genealogical method to his own particular subject of inquiry.

Nietzsche on Morality

On the Genealogy of Morality is the primary work in which Nietzsche undertakes a serious revaluation of the concept of morality through a genealogical analysis. Nietzsche's work is

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divided into three main essays, each concerned with a different key aspect of morality that he actively seeks to critique and undermine through rigorous examination of the forces and drives that led to its formation. Respectively, these sections are entitled "'Good and Evil,' 'Good and Bad,'" "'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscious,' and Related Matters," and "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?" (GM 395, 408, 424).

In "'Good and Evil,' 'Good and Bad,'" Nietzsche aims to analyze the linguistic development of the common moral terminology 'good' and 'evil' as compared with 'good' and 'bad' to illustrate the different circumstance surrounding the evolution of selfless or selfish actions; rather, they were just the linguistic representation of the possession of power. Quite simply, those with power were 'good' and those lower peoples without it were 'bad'.

However, from this rather simple valuation of 'good' and 'bad' by the "chivalric-aristocratic", Nietzsche contends that the "priestly-aristocratic" devised their own reactionary method of valuation that quickly became the first's opposite. The oppressed "priestly-aristocratic", feeling powerless and hateful and denying everything other than themselves, assigned a new system of values through which they termed themselves 'good' and assigned

Because, while 'bad' is just "an afterthought, an aside, a complementary colour" to the original idea of 'good', 'evil' is "the original, the beginning, the actual deed in the conception of slave morality" that creates 'good' as its afterthought (GM 1. 11).

If the act of denying is the clear problem of 'evil' but not of 'bad', we must then ask what the problem of the second 'good' is when it is compared to the nobility's original idea of 'good'. Nietzsche answers this question through an analysis of power and the respective expression of power. In the nobility's original definition of the word, 'good' was all that was alive, active, happy, and flourishing. Then,

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each and thus spark a revaluation of their accepted meanings. He begins this process by dispelling the notion that the term 'good' was originally applied to some "unegoistic acts" by the "recipients" of these acts who found them to be "useful" (GM 1. 2). Instead, Nietzsche argues that the "judgment 'good' does not emanate from those to whom goodness is shown … [but rather] it has been 'the good' themselves, meaning the noble, … who saw and judged themselves and their [own] actions as good" (GM 1. 2). This nobility, the higher class, saw a separation between their own "fundamental superiority of [their] higher ruling kind in relation to [the] lower kind" and thus created the category of 'bad' to encompass all those others who were not of noble breed (GM 1. 2). If this interpretation holds true, then any modern association made between the label 'good' and altruism would be an association made on false pretenses. In reality, the judgments 'good' and 'bad' have no origins in

their enemies, the nobility, the category of 'evil'. According to Nietzsche's analysis, this round of revaluation was quite different (and far more problematic) than that conducted by the nobility. While the "chivalric-aristocratic" first affirmed themselves and all the "blossoming, rich, [and] effervescent good health which" surrounded them by calling themselves 'good', the "priestly-aristocratic" were doing just the opposite (GM 1. 7). The priestly ideal of 'good' formed first out of a negative, out of a hate that denied the fortune of the nobility and instead venerated its opposite, all that the priestly people represented. Thus, states such as suffering, poverty, powerlessness, and sickliness came to be seen as 'good' or right because these were conditions common to the priestly peoples who were oppressed by the nobility (GM 1. 7-10). This original denial is the reason that the term 'evil', derived from the second round of revaluation by the slaves, is so much more problematic for society than 'bad'.

when the priestly revaluation occurred, the oppressed saw all the power and happiness that they lacked and, instead of striving for that power, they assigned any expression of said power the category 'evil' while deeming the willful repression of power 'good'. This is exactly Nietzsche's problem with the second 'good': it makes a deliberate separation of power and the expression of power. For Nietzsche, "it is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, … as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength" (GM 1. 13). The morality of the 'good' person that evolved from this second valuation bases its judgment on the false assumption that 'the doer' has "the freedom to manifest strength or [to] not" and is therefore free to choose 'good' over 'evil'. However, in reality, "there is no 'being' behind the deed … the 'doer' is invented as an afterthought, --the doing is everything" (GM 1. 14). It is through this mistaken separation

of power and power's rational expression that the oppressed are able to turn their state of weakness into a moral situation to be strived for, making their revaluated 'good' just as flawed as its counterpart 'evil'.

In his second essay, entitled "'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscious,' and Related Matters," Nietzsche examines the development of the Christian ideas of conscious and guilt in order to better account for their functioning in modern society. Nietzsche traces the feelings of conscious and guilt back to the "contractual relationship between the creditor and the debtor," in which the debtor owes a payment to the creditor and, in the event that he is unable to pay, he gives the creditor the right to not only amend the debt by inflicting pain on the debtor, but also to derive "a sort of pleasure … [from] having the right to exercise power over the powerless without a thought" (GM 2. 5). Therefore, the suffering of the debtor becomes the payment of the debt itself. In this way, the relationship between creditor and debtor mirrors that of society and citizen; the citizen derives certain benefits from his position in society and thus is "indebted" to society and subject to whatever pain that society wishes to extract as compensation (GM 2. 9). This presupposition that everything borrowed, every debt owed, has an equivocal payment works its way into the individual will and so, even when society ceases to punish minor or unnoticed offences, the individual will still "treat every offence as something which can be paid off" through self-inflicted suffering (GM 2. 10). This self-suffering becomes our understanding of guilt or bad-conscious; it is that "instinct of freedom forced back, repressed, incarcerated within itself and finally able to discharge and unleash itself only against itself" (GM 2. 17).

In Christian context, the entrenched idea of 'guilt' within the human psyche as seen through the creditor-debtor relationship manifests itself perfectly in the relationship of the Judeo-Christian God to his people. God is established as the ultimate creditor through whom we as 'guilty debtors' are able to satiate our desire to self-punish. He becomes the representation of

the individual's guilt that we have inherited from Adam and to which we are eternally bound unless God, our creditor, "sacrifice[s] himself for man's guilt" and "out of love for the debtor" frees us from ourselves (GM 2. 17). Thus, through this genealogical analysis of 'bad conscious', Nietzsche suggests that the feeling of 'guilt' is not an innate state indicative of a true objective morality, but is a result of the ways in which humans satiate their needs and desires over time.

The final essay of Nietzsche's Genealogy, "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?", critiques the ascetic model of existence that has come to be idealized in modern society by exploring its self-contradictions and functional purpose as a way of life. In the Christian ascetic ideal, man "treats life as a wrong path which he has to walk along backwards"; that is, life is something that we as people are 'guilty' of possessing (GM 3. 11). The ascetic denies the physical, the sensual, essentially life itself, and instead strives "to will nothingness" (GM 3. 1). Nietzsche argues that this "will to nothingness" present in an ascetic ideal that "demote[s] physicality to the status of an illusion" is really the expression of man's ultimate "sickness": his exhaustion, "disgust at life", and wish for the 'end' (GM 3. 12-13). The ascetic is the practical application of the human desire to be "otherwise, [to be] elsewhere" GM 3, 13).

However, even though this ascetic ideal is a denial of the physical and the sensual, and thus in part a denial of life, it is still a will. The fact that we as humans have adopted a will to "nothingness" rather than the alternative, not willing at all, indicates that man would rather partially self-deny than surrender all willing. By willing the ascetic life and believing that through this life we can achieve truth, we are essentially giving meaning to our lives. Truth becomes the meaning, the final answer, and the ascetic ideal is the means to this truth. The sense of purpose that this ideal gives us is therefore the reason for its existence and widely based support, because without the 'truth' it gives us, we would have no explanation or justification for the suffering in our lives. Nietzsche's

analysis of this ideal then serves as a mode of explanation and justification for the existence and predominance of this ideal. Though Nietzsche does not necessarily support what this ideal promotes (and, in fact, he personally rejects the ascetic values), he does provide comprehensive account of the psychological and sociological function that the ideal serves (Large and Pearson 302-303).

Foucault on Sexuality

While the primary concern that Nietzsche identified and sought to account for was the value of morality, Foucault's focus in *The History of Sexuality* is on a critical reevaluation of our accepted understanding of the role of sexuality in culture and society. Like Nietzsche, Foucault undertakes this endeavor by applying a genealogical analysis to what he terms the "repressive hypothesis" which has come to represent the commonly accepted view of how sexuality functions in history. Through this study, Foucault seeks to understand the competing drives and forces that have led to their perspective's growth, acceptance, and popularity.

Foucault begins his work by first laying out in detail the traditionally acknowledged theory of the role that sexuality occupies in society, i.e. the "Repressive Hypothesis" (*see below*). According to this interpretation of sexuality, the coming of the seventeenth century marked a definitive shift in the social acceptability of sexual acts, speech, and thought. A large scale reduction and repression of normative sexuality began to occur as the bourgeoisie, a practical and conservative class, steadily gained power. As this class's power grew increasingly stronger, their influence over sexuality likewise expanded, leading to a simultaneous repression of acts of frivolous sexuality that operated outside of the traditional marital model and served no practical purpose aside from pleasure. Through this understanding, the bourgeoisie have a power which they exert, either directly or indirectly, over sexuality; sexuality is thus made to be an object of power. The newly established Victorian age no longer supported or tolerated the public display of any type of "abnormal"

sexuality (anything outside of a marital heteronormativity) which prompted many of the outsiders of society, these "other Victorians," to take their sexual abnormality to either the brothel or the psychiatric hospital--the only two places where this outsider sexuality was seen as profitable and thus was considered acceptable (HS 4).

According to this hypothesis, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are just as subject to sexual repression as was the eighteenth. Though our social discourse may seem to be more open and free, in reality the only truly free speech of sexuality we have exists solely within the realms of theoretical discourse or scientific study. If we want to completely break from an old state of repression then there must be a revolutionary "transgression of laws, lifting of prohibitions, irruption of speech" that reinstates "pleasure within reality" (HS 5).

After giving a fairly comprehensive account of the traditional understanding of sexuality through the "repressive hypothesis", Foucault offers his opinion as to why this perspective has been the dominating ideology for so long. He rationalizes that, by discussing and debating our continuing "repression", we as participants in the discussion believe ourselves to be outside of the influence of social custom. By breaking the norms of sexuality, "we are placing [ourselves] to a certain extent outside the reach of power; … we know we are being subversive" and we engage in such revolt willingly in anticipation of the coming freedom which we see ourselves as helping to establish (HS 6-7).

As Foucault moves away from his introduction to the "repressive hypothesis", he begins to evaluate more closely the claim that speech concerning sexuality was repressed. While he recognizes that certain subjects and vocabulary were most defiantly forced out of common speech, Foucault suggests that there was an overall "discursive explosion" in the quantity of discourses dedicated to sex (HS 17). This trend is best exemplified, Foucault believes, by the Christian confessional, in which "though the language may have been refined" the "scope of the confession" expanded

exponentially (HS 19). The sexuality of children is another model that Foucault believes illustrates the discursive increase in the subject of sex. Though the actual range of speech concerning the sexuality of children diminished during this time, the overall discourse on the topic expanded as technical language and scientific studies belied the public's increasing obsession with controlling the sexual relationships and desires of children (HS 27).

This transformative shift from open and frank discussion of sex to a multiplicity of discourses policed by social acceptability and technicality marked a decisive new mode of thought concerning sexuality. Sex was now seen as a public matter of scientific study and rational approach. It was as if, by forcing sex into a discourse, society sought to control its influence within the human body; as though rationalizing the subject as something that could be studied scientifically somehow reduced its importance within our lives and bodies (HS 23). However, by thus driving sexuality into a discursive form, the range of this subject's influence only expanded, encompassing and enveloping whole worlds of thought and practice previously unconnected to sex. Our desire to approach sex as if it is a secret matter, the ultimate secret, in fact, only fuels our thirst to uncover the "truth" behind it by expanding its reach into every field imaginable (HS 33-34).

In the next section of the work, Foucault critiques the opinion that the bourgeoisie rise to power established a standard of productivity and efficiency against which all sexual acts were measured and judged. Foucault argues that this interpretation of sexuality from the Victorian age to the present age is inaccurate because, while this theory claims a reduction of abnormal sexualities, in reality there was an expansion of non-normative sexual activity. The idea of sexual "perversions" actually developed and expanded during the eighteenth century as discourses increasingly focused on the classification and identification of sexual practices that fell outside the marital heteronormative standard. Power, therefore,

was acting through sexual differentiation as a means of proliferating perversions rather than suppressing them (HS 40-41). This creation and "multiplication of disparate sexualities", along with the multiplication of sexual discourse, form the basis of Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis's role in Victorian Society (HS 49).

In Foucault's eyes, the expanding discourse of sex in the nineteenth century was quickly swallowed into the realms of science and medication. Sexual discourse became an object of knowledge: something that could be learned and that had an implicit truth to be gained. This truth was "incorporated into two very distinct orders of knowledge": the scientific study of biological reproduction and the "medicine of sex" (HS 54). Despite the perceived "interplay of truth and sex" within these two realms, Foucault observes that "the aim of such a discourse was not to state the truth but to prevent its very emergence" by limiting our knowledge of sexuality to a purely scientific understanding (HS 55). This "scientia sexualis" was then combined with the act of confession to create our modern view of sex: something which is as secret and private as the confessional and yet has an innate truth to it which it becomes our task to uncover (HS 68-73). Through this combination, sexuality has evolved to become a key aspect of how we as humans come to understand ourselves. It is a secret knowledge that can only be gained through rigorous self-examination and yet, once it is achieved, holds the possibility of explaining us to ourselves.

A Comparison of Methodology in Nietzsche and Foucault

Though they are dealing in two apparently separate subjects, both Nietzsche and Foucault approach and dissect their respective topic in remarkably similar ways. While Foucault is traditionally associated with the archeological method that he pioneered and Nietzsche typically employs his genealogical analysis, through a comparison of these two projects, we are brought to the conclusion that both are, in fact, working off of the same genealogical basis.

But just what is this genealogy? In Nietzsche's preface to *The Genealogy of Morality*, he explains to us his understanding of the analysis that he pioneers. According to Nietzsche, the project that psychologists and moralists have been undertaking for the past few decades, the approach that has thus far been termed 'genealogy', has not been a true genealogy. These "researchers have not been carrying out a genuinely historical inquiry or engaging in … 'real' or effective history … their questioning [was] simply not radical or deep enough" (Pearson and Large 300).

It was this observation that led Nietzsche to then redevelop the genealogical method into a process of inquiry that satisfactorily traced the progression of Christian morality, adding to the analysis what he felt was previously lacking from the other attempts. Nietzsche's re-appropriated genealogy was a revolutionary new approach that endeavored to not find the origins of morality as the pervious faulty genealogists had (because he believed that morality had an invention rather than an origin), but rather to "uncover the different senses of morality, that is, the different 'meanings' morality has acquired in the history of human development" (Pearson and Large 299). He sought to pay particular attention to the "conditions and circumstances under which the values emerged" and, from this, derive an adequate explanation for why these particular values hold significance or importance in society today. Thus, Nietzsche's overall aim through his radically interdisciplinary inquiry of morality is to use a counter-historical analysis to illuminate the previously muddled reasons for society's valuation of certain beliefs and practices.

Heavily influenced by Nietzsche's work, Foucault found real resonance with the methodology the Nietzsche created and used it as a jumping off point in his own analysis, varying between his own interpretations of the genealogical process and a related mode of analysis that he himself created cleverly termed "archaeology". Foucault describes his own archaeology as a process of uncovering discontinuities in history. According to

Foucault, while most historians attempt to impose a uniform continuity on historical events or proceedings by ignoring or displacing those happenings that do not conform, archaeology seeks to do just the opposite. Its concern is not the Structuralist imposition of themes and patterns as has been the aim of past historians, it instead "wishes to uncover … the play of analogues and differences as they appear at the level of rules of formation" (Arch. of Know. 160). By examining these differences (and the historians who regularly unify them to create cohesion), Foucault's archaeology is, on its most basic level, an examination of the ways in which meanings are formed through the unification of specific historical discourses. Foucault's interest is in demonstrating how historians derive certain meanings and assign certain values to those discourses that they study (Dreyfus and Rabinow 106).

While this process shows a striking similarity to Nietzsche's genealogy, at their core the two analytic approaches deal in fundamentally different spheres. While an archaeology aims to decode the process by which historians synthesize events to produce discursive meaning, a genealogy looks at any given historical interpretation of events and reevaluates those events from alternative perspectives that are not typically considered. In a sense, a genealogist "concentrates on the relations of power, knowledge, and the body in modern society", focusing on the series of events themselves rather than the meaning that a historian derives from this series (Dreyfus and Rabinow 105).

If these definitions of the two different methodological approaches are accepted, then both Foucault's work in The History of Sexuality and Nietzsche's work with The Genealogy of Morality would, without doubt, be identified as genealogies. Discounting the blatant reference to his method in the title of the book, Nietzsche's work with morality is easily seen to be a genealogical trace for numerous other reasons. Essentially, Nietzsche breaks down the category of morality into three main topics (which I have just described) and traces

their invention and changing connotations through history. With 'good' and 'evil', for example, Nietzsche employs the studies of philology, psychology, sociology and history to account for the changing understandings of the terms 'good' and 'evil' as compared to 'good' and 'bad'. He explores how these terms have come to take on their modern meaning and significance as moral designations by investigating certain realms of history and psychology, such as the Jewish revaluation, that are typically overlooked by historians. He pays particular attention to the changes in the meaning of the terms being used and notes the different sources and forces at play from which they were given their current value. He then repeats this approach in his deconstruction of the concepts of 'guilt' and 'bad conscious', this time focusing on how the physical suffering associated with the basic creditor-debtor relationship eventually became our modern understanding of 'conscious' and 'guilt'. By using a psycho-historical analysis, Nietzsche explores 'guilt', not as something innate to the human psyche as it was previously thought to be, but as the result of an interplay of competing forces and drives. And again, in his final essay on the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche examines the unexplained contradictions present in the idealization of asceticism, such as a disregard for natural wants and attempts to account of its modern importance and prominence through looking a man's psychologically rooted need to will.

Even thought the topics may initially seem unrelated, Foucault's work with sexuality is, essentially, also an examination of morals. In Foucault's own opinion, *The History of Sexuality* "is a historical ontology [related] to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents" (Gen. of Ethics 262). The book explores one of the moral codes, (in this case sexuality), that determine "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself … and [determine] how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions" (Gen. of Ethics 263). Therefore, Foucault's understanding of ethics is concerned

with the type of relationship that a person has to himself, thus leading him to analyze the process by which we subjugate ourselves to our perceptions of sexual morality. This is a book about the morality of personal sexuality and the forces and power relations at work that contribute to the creation of our current understanding of our own sexualities.

Foucault then logically interoperates sexual events and trends in much the same way that Nietzsche interoperates moral ones. Though he does introduce some differentiation through changes in dialogue, such as the integration of terms like discourse, subject, and power and the disregard of 'the will', Foucault performs a genealogical analysis of the process by which sexuality came to its modern meaning. He begins by identifying a concept that he sees a troubling and contradictory (i.e. the Victorian age of repression) then reevaluates the historical conditions and circumstances (focusing on power relations) that account for the concept's emergence and acceptance. This project stops short of becoming an archaeology and remains a genealogy because it focuses the majority of its analysis on the re-interpretation of the historical events themselves rather than attempting to find the rationale behind the meanings that historians have derived from the creation Structuralist unifications.

By employing the same genealogical methodology, both philosophers are using an interdisciplinary analysis of a subject that they find problematic to give an account of that subject's invention without invoking any sort of metaphysics. Though he wrote almost a century after Nietzsche, Foucault's work exemplifies the powerful ideological connection that he shared with his predecessor.

by Carolyn Laubender