How plausible is Nietzsche’s account of the ascetic ideal, as found in *On the Genealogy of Morals*? On what grounds should one accept it?

This essay argues that Nietzsche’s account of the ascetic ideal is plausible, with its acceptance dependent upon the extent to which the account persuades a reader, through its style of presentation, to adopt a critical approach towards asceticism. The essay begins by explicating Nietzsche’s account of the nature, origin and current status of the ascetic ideal, finding that, because it gives a compelling explanation of why one might adopt the ideal, and why the ideal might be considered a fundamental feature modern moral psychology, the account possesses plausibility. The essay then considers the standards for accepting the account, and argues that, because Nietzsche’s style of presentation aims to affect a reader emotionally rather than rationally, acceptance of the account depends upon the success of its persuasive ability. The essay goes on to argue that, as Nietzsche’s conception of modern moral psychology entails a reader can only appreciate the full content of the account if their bias towards asceticism is addressed, his polemical style of presentation should be considered a necessary component of the account. The essay ends by considering and rejecting an objection to this idea.

The ascetic ideal is the maximization of ascetic practice, performed for its own sake: a “voluntary deprivation, destruction of selfhood, self-flagellation and self-sacrifice”\(^1\) in the pursuit of total self-denial. Nietzsche claims the modern human condition entails not only suffering, but a need to justify that suffering\(^2\), and in lieu of a justification, mankind “prefers to will nothingness rather than not will”\(^3\). It is this preference that gives the ascetic ideal its function, as a coping strategy that “amounts, in effect, to a trick for the preservation of life…shutting the door on a suicidal nihilism”\(^4\). He argues that by willing nothingness (pursuing the aesthetic ideal), one can appropriate and endorse one’s suffering as justified in the name of the ideal, rather than view it as an admission of powerlessness. A practitioner of the ideal will therefore actively (though likely unconsciously) seek out methods of asceticism, not only through explicit practices of self-control, as found in religious and societal institutions, but also by developing an unhealthy relationship with conscience; discharging animalistic instincts internally, resulting in the creation of a turbulent inner life\(^5\). Cultivating ‘bad conscience’ by endowing it with notions of debt and guilt allows one to experience

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1 GM, III, 11.
2 GM, III, 28.
3 GM, III, 1.
5 GM, II, 16.
“adventure, a torture chamber, an unsafe and hazardous wilderness”\textsuperscript{6} without transgressing societal rules, and therefore risking the loss of societal benefits.

Nietzsche argues asceticism has been a slowly pervading and therefore unnoticed element of modern day society, which can be highlighted by the existence of a exaggerated propensity to feel guilt or experience bad conscience, and by the fact that ascetic practices are often seen as morally praiseworthy. His explanation for the ideal’s existence is that modern morality is derived from a prior, reactive moral system he terms the “slave morality”\textsuperscript{7}. During a perhaps pseudo-historical period of societal evolution (though Nietzsche does claim “the slave’s revolt in morality begins with the Jews”\textsuperscript{8}), a powerless under-class developed an attitude of ressentiment against a ruling class and their moral system; a pathological, irrational resentment that, due to the under-class’s powerlessness, was expressed creatively, in the rejection of their ruler’s value, and “everything that is ‘outside’, ‘other’; ‘non-self’”\textsuperscript{9}. By defining their conception of the good through opposition, the under-class could claim, “only those who suffer are good”\textsuperscript{10}, and only those who possess the characteristics of sufferers are deserving of praise and reward. Attributing value to suffering confirms the value of ascetic practices, hence Nietzsche writes, “the three great catch words of the ascetic ideal are: poverty humility, chastity”\textsuperscript{11}, and can be seen as describing both the servile origins of the ideal, and, consequently, the characteristics it continually promotes.

The figure of the ‘priest’ is essential in explaining how the ascetic ideal persisted and moved from this powerless societal faction to prevail on a society-wide level. Priests confirm slave morality’s valuation of ascetic principles by claiming the “ascetic life counts as a bridge to another existence”\textsuperscript{12}, in the sense that suffering must be endured in order to receive rewards (in an life after suffering), as opposed to the punishment awaiting those who adopt a ‘master morality’. By providing a transcendental grounding for ascetic practice, the priest gives substantive content to the idea that the ascetic ideal should be pursued for its own sake. He institutionalizes and harnesses the creative power of asceticism, and in this way embeds the ascetic practice into the fundaments of society, used “in the service of creating what we know as Western culture”\textsuperscript{13}. Indeed, it should be noted that not all ascetic practice falls under the pursuit of the ascetic ideal, given Nietzsche promotes the instrumental use of asceticism,

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{7} GM, I, 10.  
\textsuperscript{8} GM, I, 7.  
\textsuperscript{9} GM, I, 10.  
\textsuperscript{10} GM, I, 7.  
\textsuperscript{11} GM, III, 8.  
\textsuperscript{12} GM, III, 11.  
\textsuperscript{13} GM, \textit{Introduction: on Nietzsche’s critique of morality}, XXVI.
claiming it “belongs amongst the most favourable conditions for the highest spirituality”\textsuperscript{14}. He notes the importance of self-denial for artists and philosophers, who require “peace in every basement; every dog nicely on the lead”\textsuperscript{15} in order to work to their potential. This highlights that the focus of Nietzsche’s criticism is upon the radicalization of ascetic practice, rather than asceticism per se, and specifically upon they way in which radical asceticism, as promoted by the priests, inhibits human freedom, expression and potential for greatness.

The above shows Nietzsche’s account of the aesthetic ideal is extensive. It provides an intuitively compelling explanation of why one might pursue the ideal, through the idea that, in a position of suffering, the will seeks power through control over the only controllable entity available: itself. It also provides a compelling explanation of how societal culture could come to adopt such an position, through the idea that modern morality derives from a slave morality, conceived to give worth to those in suffering; it is worth noting the satisfying symmetry Nietzsche creates here between the paradigmatic traits of the slave class and the traits promoted by Christian morality. Additionally, the account provides a compelling description of how the pursuit of the ideal is enforced by societal structures, through the idea that priest-like characters embed ascetic practices in societal institutions, and provide an incentive to practice asceticism by postulating a rewarding state after suffering. Because of this grounding, it seems the descriptive component of Nietzsche’s account of the ideal can be considered plausible, or, at least as plausible as the theological account of the origin and nature of asceticism it opposes. However, the extent to which this plausibility gives reason to accept the normative component of Nietzsche’s account, that is, the claim that asceticism for its own sake should be considered a negative, inhibitive and undesirable aspect of society, is less clear.

The primary reason for this lack of clarity is perhaps the fact that Nietzsche includes no explicit argument to show why one should accept his position on asceticism over, for instance, the Kantian or Christian promotions of ascetic practice. Given the difficulty of extracting from the text a line of reasoning from the premise that modern conceptions of moral value derive from a questionable origin, to the conclusion that contemporary moral values should be rejected, one might question Nietzsche’s intentions in criticizing the ideal, and whether the standards for accepting his criticism are those applicable to a reasoned argument. Because, instead of an argument, Nietzsche sets out a his view as a rhetorical polemic, consideration must be given to the reasons motivating this choice of style, and whether those reasons entail the account can be accepted on other grounds. The remainder of

\textsuperscript{14} GM, III, 9.

\textsuperscript{15} GM, III, 8.
this essay will therefore defend the idea that closer analysis of Nietzsche’s account shows it not to be subject to the same standards of acceptance appropriate to the defences of modern moral value it opposes. Rather, that it can be considered effective to the extent that the polemic style is successful in affecting a reader emotionally.

Nietzsche writes, “It is not surprising that lambs should bear a grudge against the great birds of prey, but that is no reason for blaming the great birds of prey”\(^{16}\), highlighting that an attitude of *resentment* entails an irrational rejection of ‘the other’. Because his account claims that this attitude persists in society, in the conception of modern moral values, it would seem there is an extent to which modern morality is irrational, and therefore insusceptible to reasoned argument. Further, as Nietzsche questions the value of moral practices assumed by a reader to be valuable unconditionally, an appeal to moral intuition also appears unavailable to him. Therefore, to create a persuasive account, it seems Nietzsche must utilise a method that does not rely on either moral intuition or the assumed rationality of a reader. By conveying his critique in the form of a rhetorical polemic, Nietzsche can provoke a reader on a more basic, emotional level, breaking the supposed indoctrination of the ascetic ideal, and “freeing higher human beings from their false consciousness about morality (their false belief that this morality is *good for them*)”\(^{17}\). On such an interpretation, Nietzsche’s account is not intended as an argument, and not therefore accountable to such standards of acceptance. It is instead intended as a preparation, prior to any (possible) argument, to remove a reader’s implicit bias towards a modern conception of moral value.

Understanding *Genealogy* in this way reveals a twofold motivation behind Nietzsche’s account. On the one hand, it can be considered a genealogical enquiry into the history of morality and the development of modern moral psychology, which Nietzsche then uses to criticize modern society’s conception of moral value and employment of the ascetic ideal, on the grounds that it inhibits human flourishing and the proper functioning of human nature. On the other hand, the account can be considered to be motivated by a practical aim, or as Leiter terms it, a “therapeutic objective”\(^{18}\), to address, through affecting the emotions, the prevalence of asceticism in society; providing an alternative model of value, “because to date [asceticism] has been the only ideal; no counter-ideal has been made available”\(^{19}\). These two motivations seem intimately linked, as the ‘therapeutic’ process is carried out via the polemical representation of Nietzsche’s genealogical enquiry. Janaway argues that it would be mistaken to think one could even separate the two, as, if Nietzsche had presented

\(^{16}\) GM, I, 26.

\(^{17}\) Leiter, *Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Philosophy*.

\(^{18}\) Leiter, Review of *Beyond Selflessness* By Janaway.

\(^{19}\) GM, *Introduction: on Nietzsche’s critique of morality*, XIV.
“impersonal, rational considerations alone”, he “would in his eyes have risked failure to grasp the true nature of our values and [the] opportunity to call them into question”\textsuperscript{20}. In other words, Nietzsche’s account of modern moral psychology entails the only way of ensuring the content the account of the ideal is fully appreciated by a reader is to present the account in way that appeals emotionally rather than rationally or intuitionally. It can therefore be argued that the extent to which one should accept Nietzsche’s account depends upon the extent that one is moved by its mode of presentation to view the ascetic ideal in a negative light.

The above suggests that Nietzsche’s manner of presentation is not a contingent stylistic choice, but a necessary component of his account, without which a reader could not grasp the full extent to which the ascetic ideal affects their flourishing, and therefore not fully accept Nietzsche’s criticism. However, one might question the idea that the polemical style of the text cannot be separated from Nietzsche’s theoretical claims without affecting the content of those claims. Leiter raises the example of Freudian psychoanalysis, which has both therapeutic and theoretical elements, but unlike Nietzsche’s account, separates these elements into distinct disciplines: “therapy took place in the psychoanalyst's office. Freud's books, by contrast, expressed the cognitive content of his philosophical or theoretical positions”\textsuperscript{21}. Leiter suggests an analogy between Nietzsche’s account of the ideal and the Freudian notion of ‘transference’, claiming, whilst it is unquestionable that a “theoretical description of transference is no substitute for the patient's actual experience of transference”\textsuperscript{22}, the full theoretical content of the idea of transference can be derived from Freud’s books, without the need to experience his therapeutic method. Therefore, that Nietzsche’s account is “both the expression of the theoretical position and the therapeutic method” does not entail the therapeutic method is a necessary component of the theoretical position, as the theoretical position could be stated unrhetorically, without the need to experience the therapeutic method.

However, what this analogy fails to acknowledge is that Nietzsche doesn’t seem to view the theoretical element of his account as having any substantive epistemic status independently of his therapeutic method. Nietzsche is critical of the idea of a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge”\textsuperscript{23}, and that philosophical discoveries can be viewed independently of a discoverer. Rather, he sees philosophical standpoints as informed by perspectives derived from certain character traits and contexts, representing an “unconscious

\textsuperscript{20} Janaway, Beyond Selflessness, p4.
\textsuperscript{21} Leiter, Review of Beyond Selflessness By Janaway.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} GM, III, 12.
autobiography” that reveals the underlying wills of those who conceive them. Given this conception, philosophical works promote a kind of perspective-loaded knowledge, not absolute truths, and it seems the content of such knowledge could not be easily separated from the perspective it emanated from. Therefore, a full appreciation of Nietzsche’s account would seem to necessarily require a reader to experience the account from Nietzsche’s perspective, or at least, from a perspective untainted by modern moral psychology. In this sense, it can be argued that the therapeutic method, that is, the polemical style of the account, cannot be separated from the account’s theoretical position without altering the content of that position, because it necessary (at least for the average modern reader) in ensuring a full appreciation of Nietzsche’s account.

After explicating Nietzsche’s account of the ascetic ideal, this essay found it gives a plausible explanation of why one might adopt the ideal, and why it might be considered pervasive in both modern moral psychology and modern societal values. The essay then claimed that, because of the account’s unusual style, and that it doesn’t seem to provide any explicit argument from the descriptive component of his account to his normative conclusion, an acceptance of the account should depend, not upon the strength of Nietzsche’s argument (if there is one), but upon its ability to persuade a reader of its viewpoint. The essay therefore argued that the presentational choice of a polemic, designed to affect emotionally rather than rationally or intuitionally, is a necessary component of Nietzsche’s account. The essay considered an objection to this argument, which claimed by analogy that removing the account’s mode of presentation does not affect the content of the account. It then argued this objection should be rejected, as the analogy does not capture Nietzsche’s conception of his account as a bound up with a certain perspective, which entails that a full appreciation of the account requires being persuaded by its polemic style. Therefore, the essay concludes that Nietzsche’s account is plausible, and it should be accepted to the extent that it is successful in persuading a reader of its viewpoint.

2497 words.

Bibliography:


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24 BGE, I, 6.