

individuals who accept easily that life is tough, unequal, unfair, and who welcome asserting their strength to meet the challenge. Those who have unbending wills against anything the world can throw at them.

But such magnificent human beings are few and far between in the nineteenth century, and Nietzsche wonders why. And he looks back on past cultures where the magnificent men dominated: strength was prized and inequality was a fact of life. Assertiveness and conquest were a source of pride. He names the Japanese feudal nobility as an example, with their samurai code of honor, and the Indian Brahmins who rose and imposed their caste system, the Vikings who raided ruthlessly up and down the European coast, the expansionist Arabs—and of course the awesome Roman Empire.<sup>52</sup>

What explains this stark contrast? Why do some cultures rise to greatness and unabashedly impose their will upon the world—while other cultures seem apologetic and urge upon us a bland conformity?

## 24. *Masters and slaves*

Part of the answer, says Nietzsche, is biological.

All of organic nature is divided into two broad species-types—those animals that are naturally herd animals and those that are naturally loners—those that are prey and those that are predators. Some animals are by nature sheep, field mice, or cows—and some animals are by nature wolves, hawks, or lions. Psychologically and physically, this divide also runs right through the human species. Some people are born fearful and inclined to join a herd—and some are born fearless and inclined to seek lonely heights. Some are born sedentary and sluggish—and some are born crackling with purpose and craving adventure.<sup>53</sup> Some of us, to use Nietzsche's language, are born to be slaves, and some are born to be masters.

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<sup>52</sup> *GM*, 1:11.

<sup>53</sup> *TI* "Skirmishes" 33, 35.

And which type you are—there is little you can do about it. There is a brute biological fact here: Each of us is the product of a long line of evolution, and our traits are evolutionarily bred into us. Just as a sheep cannot help but be sheepish and a hawk cannot help but be hawkish, each of us inherits from our parents and from their parents before them a long line of inbuilt traits. “It cannot be erased from a man’s soul what his ancestors have preferably and most constantly done.”<sup>54</sup>

The master types live by strength, creativity, independence, assertiveness, and related traits. They respect power, courage, boldness, risk-taking, even recklessness. It is natural for them to follow their own path no matter what, to rebel against social pressure and conformity.<sup>55</sup>

The slave types live in conformity. They tend to passivity, dependence, meekness. It is natural for them to stick together for a sense of security, just as herd animals do.<sup>56</sup>

Now, Nietzsche says, let’s talk about *morality*, about good and bad, right and wrong. For a long time we have been taught that morality is a matter of religious commandments set in stone thousands of years ago.

Not so, says Nietzsche. What we take to be moral depends on our biological nature—and different biological natures dictate different moral codes.

Think of it this way: If you are a sheep, then what will seem good to you as a sheep? Being able to graze peacefully, sticking close together with others just like you, being part of the herd and not straying off. What will seem bad to you? Well, wolves will seem bad, and anything wolf-like, predatory, aggressive. But what if you are a wolf? Then strength, viciousness, and contempt for the sheep will come naturally to you and seem good. There is nothing the wolves and the sheep can agree on morally—their natures are different, as are their needs and goals, as is what feels good to them. Of course it would be

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<sup>54</sup> BGE 264.

<sup>55</sup> GM 1:6.

<sup>56</sup> BGE 199.

good for the sheep if they could convince the wolves to be more sheep-like—but what self-respecting wolf would fall for that?

“That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no grounds for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: ‘these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?’ there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: ‘we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb.’”<sup>57</sup>

The same point holds for humans. The divide between strong and weak, assertive and timid, runs straight through the human species. The key question to ask about morality is *not*: Is such and such a value universally and intrinsically good? Rather the question is: *What kind of person* finds this value to be valuable?

In Nietzsche’s words, one’s moral code is a “decisive witness to who he is,” to the “innermost drives of his nature.”<sup>58</sup> “Moral judgments,” Nietzsche says, are “symptoms and sign languages which betray the process of physiological prosperity or failure.”<sup>59</sup>

So: one’s moral code is a function of one’s psychological make-up, and one’s psychological make-up is a function of one’s biological make-up.

The biological language and examples in those quota-

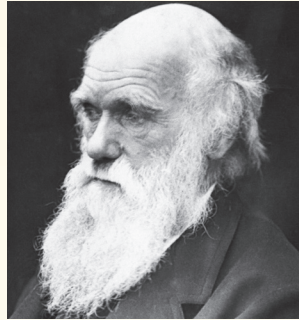
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<sup>57</sup> *GM* 1:13.

<sup>58</sup> *BGE* 6.

<sup>59</sup> *WP* 258. See also *D* 542 and *BGE* 221.

tions show that biology is crucial to Nietzsche's views on morality. Nietzsche was a precocious fifteen years old when Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Evolutionary ideas had been in the air for a long time before Darwin, and much of the intellectual world was moving away from thinking of the reality in terms of timeless, unchanging absolutes to viewing it in terms of process and change. All of this applies to morality too.



**Charles Darwin**

Moral codes, Nietzsche is here suggesting, are part of a biological type's life strategy of survival, and the more we look at the history of morality evolutionarily and biologically, the more we are struck by the diversity of circumstances and how dramatically beliefs about values have changed across time.

This is precisely our key problem culturally, Nietzsche argues. The evidence shows that we once prized excellence and power and looked down upon the humble and the lowly. Now the meek, the common man, the kindly neighbor are the "good guys" while the aggressive, the powerful, the strong, the proud are "evil."<sup>60</sup>

Think of it this way: Suppose I gave you the following list of traits and urged them upon you positively.

It is good to be *proud* of yourself, to have a healthy sense of *self-esteem*.

*Wealth* is good, for it gives you the power to live as you wish.

Be *ambitious* and *bold*, and seek your highest dream.

Don't take any nonsense from other people—make it clear that

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<sup>60</sup> GM 1:4.

you will take *vengeance* and exact *justice* against those who mess with you.

Seek to improve your life and devote yourself only to things that will *profit* you; don't waste your time or resources.

Seek great *challenges*, great *pleasures*, including *sensual* pleasures of the body, and go your own *independent* way in life, embracing whatever *risks* you must to develop a full and realized sense of yourself as an *individual*.

And when you accomplish something great, *admire yourself* for what you have done and *indulge* yourself in the rewards that greatness deserves.

Pride, Self-esteem

Wealth

Ambition, Boldness

Vengeance

Justice

Profit

Challenge

Pleasure, Sensuality

Independence

Risk

Individualism

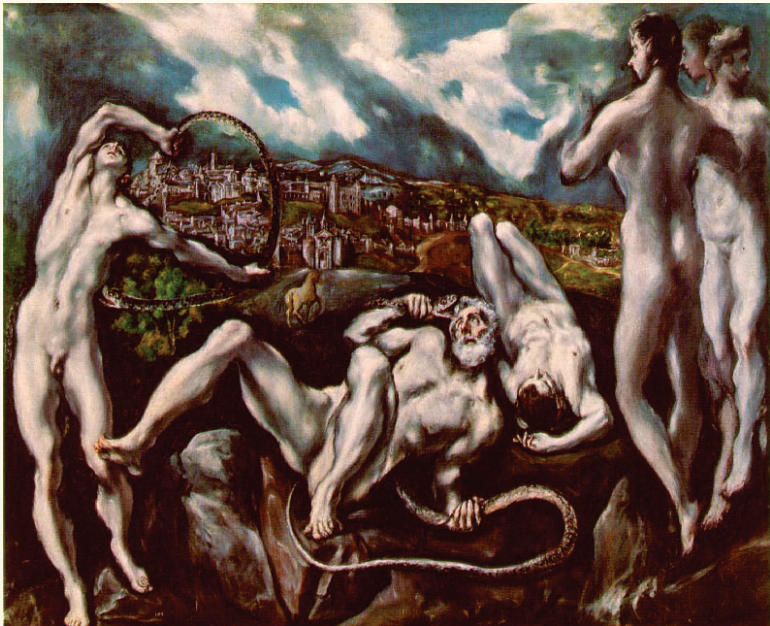
Admiration of self

Indulgence

Now consider the elements in this list together as a package. Does that list resonate with you? Do you feel in your bones that if more people lived this way they would live more active, fuller lives and they and the human species would realize its highest potential?

Now consider a different list of traits, and let me urge them upon you positively too.

One should be *humble*, for *pride goeth before the fall*. The *meek* shall inherit the earth, and blessed are the *poor*. As for wealth and the rich, *it shall be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven*. Instead of seeking profit, one should *sacrifice* and give to *charity*. Be *patient* and *forgiving*. *Turn the other cheek*. Be aware of one's *weaknesses* and *sins*, and be *ashamed* and self-deprecating as a result. Practice *self-restraint*, particularly with respect to your lower, impure, and often *disgusting physical* desires. Play it *safe*, think of other people's needs and *don't rock the boat*, and realize that we're all *dependent* upon each other. *Obey* your parents and your preacher and the politicians.



El Greco, *Laocoön*, c. 1610/1614

<i>Masters</i>	<i>Slaves</i>
Pride, Self-esteem	Humility; Pride goeth before the fall.
Bold	The meek shall inherit the earth.
Rich	Blessed are the poor.
Wealth	It shall be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.
Profit	Sacrifice, Charity
Ambition	Patience
Vengeance	Forgiveness
Justice	Turn the other cheek
Sense of self worth	Weakness, sinfulness
Admiration of self	Shame
Indulgence	Self-restraint
Sensuality	Disgust at the physical
Challenge	Safety
Individualism	Don't rock the boat
Independence	Dependence
Autonomy	Obedience

Does the list on the right resonate with you? Do you feel that if more people lived that way they would live better lives and they and the human species would realize its highest potential?

Nietzsche is crystal clear about the list on the right—that list is *dangerous* to human potential. It reeks of weakness, even sickness and unhealthiness. It undermines the human potential for greatness, and it is, tragically, the dominant morality of our time. In our time, the traits that ennoble man are condemned, and all the traits that weaken man are praised. Morality, as Nietzsche puts it paradoxically, has become a bad thing;

morality has become immoral: “precisely morality would be to blame if the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man was never in fact attained? So that precisely morality was the danger of dangers?”<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, Nietzsche concludes, “we need a critique of moral values, the value of these values themselves must first be called in question—and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed.”<sup>62</sup>

## ***25. The origin of slave morality***

Our problem is this: Somehow the morality of the weak has become dominant, and the morality of the strong has declined. How is this rather paradoxical state of affairs to be explained?

Part of the story depends on our individual biological and psychological make-ups—for each of us individually, one or the other of the two moralities resonates more within us. But part of the story is cultural, because sometimes the master morality dominates a culture and sometimes the slave morality dominates—and here there is a history lesson.<sup>63</sup>

Part of the historical story is that the modern world has embraced democracy, and democracy means giving power to the majority, and a majority of people are, shall we say, conformist in their tastes, concerned with what their neighbors think about them, looking forward to retirement when they won’t have to do anything, content to sit passively in their little homes gossiping and griping about their bosses and mothers-in-law.

Democracy gives *that* sort of person power, so we should expect that democratic laws and policies will reflect the tastes and interests of that sort of person. Democracies tailor their policies to the majority—not to the exceptional few who

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<sup>61</sup> GM Preface 6.

<sup>62</sup> GM Preface 6.

<sup>63</sup> GM Preface: 3 and 6.