
Freud's and Nietzsche's Views on Human Morality

Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud offer bold critiques of human morality that greatly differ from the commonly accepted views of virtue and ethics. Both reject the idea of morality as an instinctive or natural element of human life. Rather, they contend that morality has been created in reaction to the realities of human existence. Although Freud and Nietzsche both claim that morality is a reactive creation, they greatly differ in their accounts of the value of morality. Nietzsche claims that reactive morality is "bad air" to humans and has prevented humanity from flourishing. Freud, however, argues that morality is a necessary aspect of civilization and has enabled humans to peacefully live together. The disagreement between Freud and Nietzsche over the value of morality in human existence is a function of the different motivations that drive their critiques of morality. While Nietzsche's critique seeks to explore the effect of morality on the individual, Freud's critique seeks to outline the function of morality in society as a whole.

In his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche attempts to explore the "value of [human] values" (7) by investigating the origins of morality through a number of hypothetical narratives. One such narrative that is critical in understanding Nietzsche's account of morality is his metaphor of a powerless lamb that is constantly preyed upon by a powerful bird of prey. The lamb, powerless to stop the bird from preying, labels the bird as evil for preying upon the lamb. Furthermore, the lamb declares itself as good because it is nothing like the bird. In this reaction to the bird, the lamb compensates for its *ressentiment* at its powerlessness by becoming the stronger moral being despite the fact that it is physically weaker. The lamb's reaction to the bird is the result of the lamb's will to power. The will to power is every individual's drive "for an optimum of favorable conditions in which to fully release [its] power" (76). To create conditions that enable the lamb to release its power, the lamb invents an alternative criterion of strength -- moral strength, virtue, and goodness -- that it can use to make its weakness powerful. In Nietzsche's view, morality thus springs from and compensates for powerlessness.

Nietzsche uses the metaphor of the powerless lamb to explore the reactive tendencies of all powerless beings. Like the powerless lamb, powerless humans have reacted to their lack of power by labeling weakness as morally good. Actions that are a result of a lack of power -- weakness, timidity, submission, or cowardice -- are revalued by powerless beings as moral. Weakness is thus revalued as accomplishment, timidity as humility, submission as obedience, and cowardice as patience. Meanwhile, the actions of powerful humans -- dominance, physicality, or the accumulation of wealth -- are revalued as evil. As a result, the power relationship between the powerful and the powerless is translated into a moral relationship.

An important part of Nietzsche's critique of morality is his argument that reactive "slave"

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morality is bad for the individual and has “obstructed human flourishing” (5). There are many aspects of reactive morality that Nietzsche finds problematic. One factor is the aspect of deception that morality involves. Morality labels the powerless beings as morally better than the powerful beings. However, Nietzsche argues that these powerless beings are not better than the powerful beings. In fact, he claims that powerless beings “want to be powerful one day” (29). Morality thus requires powerless beings to deceive themselves into believing that being weak and “moral” is better and more desirable than being strong and “evil.” Another problem Nietzsche identifies with human morality is that it is merely a reaction to powerlessness. He argues that this reactivity is unhealthy for the individual as it causes the powerless individual to become “rankled by poisonous and hostile feelings” (21) toward those who are powerful. The individual comes to define him or herself by his or her powerlessness and thus becomes deeply invested in his or her own impotence. As a result, the individual is unable to act or flourish; powerlessness becomes the foundation of the individual’s existence.

Freud’s account of human morality shares many similarities with Nietzsche’s account. Like Nietzsche, Freud argues that human morality has been created in reaction to the realities of human existence. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Freud claims that human morality has been created by civilization as a reaction to the aggressive instincts of human beings. He states that human morality takes form in the individual through the superego. The superego is the voice inside the individual that tells the individual “no.” It constrains the individual to morality and goodness, and that tells him or her how he or she “should” behave. The superego internalizes the parental voice of childhood and prevents the expression of our destructive aggressive instincts in the same way that parents prevent the expression of these instincts as children.

Freud’s critique of the superego suggests that he believes that human morality is a necessary aspect of existence. He claims that the superego is civilization’s greatest invention in dealing with aggression. Through the superego, aggressivity is “introjected, internalized, and sent back to where it came from... directed towards [one’s] own ego” (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 756). The superego reroutes human aggressivity away from other human beings and instead directs it inward. Civilization requires this “internalization of the aggressive impulses” (214). Without the superego, humans would always give in to their aggressive impulses, leading to chaos and the complete breakdown of society. Although Freud admits that the superego exacts a psychic toll on the individual by punishing the individual’s ego for its desires, he nevertheless remains supportive of the demands of civilization. He contends, “We owe to the process of [civilization] the best of what we have become, as well as a good part of what we suffer from” (215). Freud’s critique of the superego suggests that he sees human morality as a necessary -- if somewhat damaging -- aspect of existence if humans are to live peacefully together.

Freud’s conception of human morality shares many similarities with Nietzsche’s critical approach. Both Freud and Nietzsche claim that morality is a creation and is not a natural or

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instinctive aspect of existence. Furthermore, both argue that morality is primarily a reaction to the realities of human life. Despite these critical similarities, Freud and Nietzsche reach very different conclusions as to the overall value of morality. This disagreement is a function of the different motivations that drive their critiques. Nietzsche's critique is extremely concerned with the impact of human morality on the individual. He begins *On the Genealogy of Morality* by claiming that humans need "a critique of moral values" and an examination of "the value of [our] values" (7). Throughout his critique, Nietzsche makes constant reference to the effect of morality on the individual. He explores how reactive morality can negatively define an individual's existence and prevent personal growth. Nietzsche's conception of the origins of morality demonstrates his individual-centric approach to morality. He essentially claims that morality is a creation of powerless individuals in response to powerful individuals. Nietzsche's critique of morality is thus distinctly indifferent to society. When Nietzsche claims that morality might have obstructed human flourishing, he is primarily concerned with how morality has prevented the individual from maximizing his or her capacities for originality, expression, and personal progress.

In contrast, Freud's critique of morality is primarily interested in how human morality functions within society as a whole. Unlike Nietzsche, Freud argues that human morality is not a human creation. Rather, he claims that morality has been created by civilization in response to human aggression. When Freud explores morality and the superego, he emphasizes how these structures enable humans to peacefully coexist. Although Freud does recognize that morality exacts a psychic toll on the individual, his primary concern is that of society as a whole. Freud's critique suggests that he believes that the individual costs of morality are necessary for civilization to function. In essence, Freud is supportive of the demands of civilization. Freud would definitively reject Nietzsche's claim that morality has prevented human flourishing. On the contrary, Freud would claim that morality has enabled human flourishing.

Freud and Nietzsche both offer compelling critiques of human morality that provide fresh perspectives on an extremely complicated aspect of existence. Although Freud and Nietzsche conceptualize morality in a similar manner, their critical approaches to morality are driven by much different motivations. While Freud seeks to outline the function of morality in society and civilization, Nietzsche attempts to explore the effects of morality on the individual. As a result of these different motivations, Freud and Nietzsche reach dramatically different conclusions regarding the value of human morality in our world.

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