



Good and Evil Redefined Friedrich Nietzsche

*Under what conditions did man set forth his value judgments of “Good” and “Evil” . . .
Nietzsche, Preface to The Genealogy of Morals*

By examining the many finer and baser moral systems that have influenced and still influence the world, I have found that certain traits regularly reappear in combination. Until finally two basic types have been revealed to me and a basic difference has emerged. There is a leader morality and a slave morality. Let me add at once that all higher and more complex cultures make an effort to combine both moral systems. Usually the systems get tangled and misunderstood, indeed, now and then they even lodge together in the same people, in the same single soul. The differences in moral values depend on whether they come from a ruling class, comfortably aware of its detachment from its inferiors, or from the inferiors, slaves and dependents of all kinds. In the first case, if the rulers determine moral values, the idea of “good” means a lofty, proud state of the soul which serves to distinguish and determine those of rank. The man of rank cuts himself off from creatures in whom the opposite of such a proud, lofty soul appears. He detests them. One understands at once that for this higher moral type the contrast between “good” and “wicked” is the same as the contrast between “noble” and “common.”

The contrast between today’s so-called good and so-called evil has another origin, for which let us hate the cowardly, jittery, petty man thinking only of security, also the suspicious man with his covert glances, the slavish doglike kind of man who lets himself be whipped, the wheedling flatterer, and above all the liar. A basic belief of all aristocrats is that the common people are liars.

“We honest ones.” — Thus the nobles of ancient Greece described themselves. It is perfectly clear that the standards of moral values were first of all for men, then were later led astray and applied to actions. Thus it is a serious error for historians of morality to start by asking such questions as, “Why should an action involving fellow feeling be praised?”

The noble man looks to himself as the arbiter of values, has no need to be adjudged good. He decrees: “What is harmful to me is in itself harmful.” He knows it is he himself who lends the highest value to things, that he is the arbiter of values. He honors everything that he finds in himself. Such a morality is self-ennobling.

In the forefront of this morality stands a taste for monopoly, for power that wants to overflow, for joy at the breaking point, for experience of great wealth that can grant or deprive. The noble man does help unfortunates, but hardly or not at all from fellow feeling, rather from an impulse prompted by the abundance of his power. The noble man honors what is powerful in himself, for he who has power over himself understands what to say and when to guard his tongue,

struggles against his own nature with harsh, hard joy, and has reverence for all that is harsh and hard. "Wotan set a hard heart within my breast," says an old Scandinavian saga. Thus the soul of a proud Viking is truly described. Such a man is proud of not being bred for fellow feeling, for the saga's hero continues warningly, "He whose heart is not hard in youth will never have a hard heart." The noble, brave men who think this way are the farthest off from that kind of moral standard that sees signs of virtue in fellow feeling, in doing good deeds for others, or in being neutral.

Belief in one's self, pride in one's self, irony toward and a basic hatred of so-called selflessness belong as clearly to leader morality as do quiet contempt for and distrust of fellow feeling and so-called warm hearts. The powerful know what to honor. It is their art, their province of knowledge. Typical of the morality of the powerful is a deep respect for their forefathers and for the past (all justice rests upon this dual respect), belief in the past and prejudice in its favor. And if, demoralized by so-called modern ideas common men believe almost instinctively in so-called Progress and in a so-called Future and more and more fail to respect the past, the low origin of these so-called modern ideas has in this way amply betrayed itself.

Leader morality is more a taste for the present, is alien and painful in the harshness of its principles, requiring a man to owe allegiance only to his equals. Here is how fellow feeling fits in: with all creatures of lower rank, with all that is alien, a man may deal as he thinks good or "as his heart wills it," at all events beyond the common standards of good and evil. The need and ability for greater gratitude and greater hate, both among equals only, the refinements of revenge, the idea of delicacy of friendship, a certain compulsion to have enemies (as a sort of release for affectation, envy, viciousness, insolence, in effect, to be able to be a good friend) : all these things are typical traits of leader morality which, as has been implied, is not the morality of so-called modern ideas. Therefore it is hard to accept today, also hard to uncover and to explain.

The second kind of morality, slave morality, is quite the opposite. Suppose the beaten, the crushed, the suffering, the enslaved, the self-ignorant, the exhausted set up a standard of good and evil. What will the pattern of their moral values be? Probably the expression of a gloomy distrust of man's entire state. Perhaps a condemnation of man himself together with his state. The slave's viewpoint condemns the virtues of the powerful. He has skepticism, distrust, a refinement of distrust against all the "good" that ought to be honored. He has to persuade himself that joy itself is not proper. Instead, those traits that serve to ease the existence of sufferers are pushed out in front and spotlighted. Fellow feeling, the obliging helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industry, humility, friendliness, all these come to be honored. For these are the necessary traits of slave morality and provide almost its only means of coping with the pressures of life.

Slave morality is essentially based on security. Here is the source for the creation of that famous contrast between so-called good and so-called evil. The so-called evil of slave morality includes power, awesomeness, a certain terror, elegance and strength, all really unworthy of being despised. According to slave morality, so-called evil inspires fear. According to leader morality it is the "good" man who inspires fear, and wishes to do so, while the "wicked" man shows himself to be detestable. The contrast is at its sharpest when so-called good, according to the standards of slave morality, takes on an odor of the contemptible, delicate, and well deserved, because the good of the slavish way of thinking belongs of necessity to the purposeless man. He is good-natured, easy to betray, perhaps a little stupid, a goodfellow.

Above all, where slave morality dominates, language narrows and the words "good" and

“stupid” come together. A final basic difference: the desire for liberty, the instinct for playing and for all other aspects of the whims of freedom, belong of necessity to slave morality and morals; while art and a passionate devotion to duty form the standard condition of an aristocratic system of thought and values.

FOR ANALYSIS

1. Which two groups determine moral values?
2. What are the characteristics of each group, according to Nietzsche? Which group does he favor?
3. Nietzsche says that “the standards of moral values were first of all for men, then were later led astray and applied to actions.” What does he mean?
4. What is good, according to the thinking of noble men? What is evil, according to them?
5. What is good, according to the thinking of inferiors? What is evil, according to them?
6. What does Nietzsche think is good? What does he think is evil? What reasons does he offer for his views?
7. Are Nietzsche’s ideas of good and evil basically the reverse of our own?
8. The third from the final paragraph deals with what Nietzsche calls “slave morality.” What is it, and what is your opinion of it? What is there in your own twentieth century background that helps influence your answer?

FOR DISCUSSION

For what kind of man did Nietzsche propose his moral standards? How closely would this kind of man resemble the superman discussed in Part One? To whom, then, did slave morality apply? How fully would you agree with Nietzsche in these applications?

Friedrich Nietzsche. *From Beyond Good and Evil* (1885). Translation and questions from Joseph Henry Satin. *Ideas in Context*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. Text in public domain.

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