

## **The Life of Value: Nietzsche's Ascetic Ideal as the Will to Humility**

**By Mark White**

The primary curse of sentience is knowledge of one's own insignificance in the universe. Mankind lacks a purpose, at least a purpose that can be universally defined and sought after. Eventually, each human knows, he or she will perish; life ends and death takes its place. In some of the closing words of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche states that "something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void " he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself" (Nietzsche 162). As a result, Nietzsche claims, mankind created religion, an ascetic ideal born out of slave-minded morality; yet religion does not (indeed, cannot) bestow value on a person's life. Nietzsche's arguments against religious morality, the religious lifestyle (epitomized in the ascetic ideal), and scientific inquiry show that the only life that is truly alive, and therefore of value, is one which exists by reliance on its own strength, its own Will to Power (as Nietzsche calls it), by rejecting these outward forces upon the human conscience. However, this definition of strength hardly seems sufficient. While Nietzsche's reasoning to justify the Will to Power is both sound and valid and offers one interpretation of the life of value, the strength expressed by the suppression of the Will to Power, realized through the ascetic idea, represents a greater, and therefore more valuable, expression of life.

First and foremost, one must understand Nietzsche's extremely detailed and remarkably lucid argument against conventional morality. Two kinds of morality exist in the world, he states. One is the master morality, created unconsciously by the elite classes

through seemingly self-evident justification: "good" is simply defined as how the elites live, while "bad" is how they do not live. This definition holds up not only historically, but etymologically as well. In his survey of various languages, Nietzsche

found they all led back to the same conceptual transformation " that everywhere 'noble,' 'aristocratic' in the social sense, is the basic concept from which 'good' in the sense of 'with a soul of a high order' necessarily developed: a development which always runs parallel with that other in which 'common,' 'plebeian,' 'low' are finally transformed into the concept 'bad' (27-8).

The second form of morality, which Nietzsche claims is much more pervasive (indeed, it has "required two thousand years to achieve victory," but victorious it has been nevertheless), is slave morality (34). Slave morality stems from a state of resentment, where the underprivileged in society, as a form of rebellion against the wealthy and privileged classes, develop a scornful attitude toward all things noble and, instead, seek their opposite. This mentality began with the Jews, "from the trunk of that tree of vengefulness and hatred, Jewish hatred " the profoundest and sublimest kind of hatred, capable of creating ideals and reversing values" (34). Jesus himself epitomized this, for His sacrifice on the cross to achieve salvation is precisely the opposite of the path that would have been taken by the master morality (35). Instead of vengeance, Judeo-Christian morality seeks reconciliation; instead of hatred and conquering power, love and pity; instead of the sword, the olive branch. This slave morality, by its very nature, leads to weak human beings who delude themselves with false sense of reality, unlike the

nobles, who "did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their enemies, or to persuade themselves, deceive themselves, that they were happy" (38).

From this concept of slave morality, which grew to dominate Europe and European history through the Christian Church, Nietzsche goes on to describe the ascetic ideal as it pertains to religion. The ascetic ideal is, in essence, the desire on the part of every human being to find meaning and purpose (a life of value) through constant devotion to a discipline; though he does refer to both Hinduism and Buddhism (132-4), Nietzsche's primary focus is on Christian doctrine. The leaders of the church, the ascetic priests, use the sense of resentment to foster a doctrine of self-deprecation. Religion imparts a sense of suffering to its practitioners, based in slave morality; those who are sick in spirit (the weak, according to Nietzsche), say to themselves, "I suffer: someone must be to blame for it" "thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: 'Quite so, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone; you alone are to blame for yourself!' " (128). By redirecting resentment inward rather than outward, the ascetic priest creates guilt in the followers of the ascetic ideal; this guilt, this creation of the concept of a "sinner," brings still more suffering upon the person concerned. Religion must work against this suffering (created by its own doctrine) to maintain its grip on power; it does this through the muting of feelings for life, mechanical activity, petty pleasures, herd organization, and the concept of "love of one's neighbor" (136). The most interesting, "guilty" method of alleviating suffering, however, is through an "orgy of feeling," a great outburst of emotion or sensations that relieves the pain of suffering brought on by guilt (136). Instead of curing

the suffering, however, the orgy of feeling increases the sinner's desire for suffering and suffering's cure; the deeper a person moves into his/her faith, the more sin and guilt they see in all their actions (141). It is important to remember that the ascetic priest himself, the controller and perpetuator of this cycle of suffering, is under the cycle's effects as well; thus he thinks that by employing these methods he is helping the sick of spirit (142).

What, then, does Nietzsche say gives a life any value? He repeatedly mentions an upcoming book which he has entitled *The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revolution of All Values*. Though this book was never published, it is clear that the ideas which he hints at throughout the *Genealogy* must be the essential ingredients of his concept of value. Nietzsche has written an entire polemic against what he views as spiritual weakness or sickness, a desire to find value in life outside of one's self and one's own will. This is mainly realized through religion, but Nietzsche also points out that the ascetic ideal can be found in modern science and philosophy:

Observe the ages in the history of people when the scholar steps into the foreground: they are ages of exhaustion, often of evening and decline; overflowing energy, certainty of life and of the future, are things of the past. A predominance of mandarins always means something is wrong; so do the advent of democracy, international courts in place of war, equal rights for women, the religion of pity, and whatever other symptoms of declining life there are (Nietzsche 154).

Humans develop a dependence on or faith in things which are not, in the hopes that they might some day be; this is possible through both religion and academic disciplines. They would rather place their value in the false beliefs that give their lives meaning rather than live in a meaningless void: "Man would rather will nothingness than

not will" (163). To Nietzsche, this self-deception is a misplaced "Will to Truth," which, as truth does not exist, is essentially a "will [to] nothingness" (161-2). Thus any life that dedicates itself to this ascetic ideal is dedicated to nothingness and is, by default, worthless. Where, then, can value be found? The answer is in the Will to Power, a strength within one's self that dictates one's actions based on one's own desires, sparing no time for the considerations of other ideas. Life dominates; it lives, expands, exerts its will and proclaims its existence in the universe. Anything that does not do this, Nietzsche appears to be saying, is dead and worthless.

Both through his exceptionally poetic writing and sound logical arguments, Nietzsche makes an extremely strong case against religion and religious morality. However, his scope seems to be needlessly narrowed by his own cynicism (the Genealogy is, after all, a polemic). His argument is sufficient to convince most that a life lived through the strength of will is indeed the only one that is of value; however, what exactly is meant by strength of will? It seems obvious that Nietzsche means it to be precisely what the sick-in-spirit followers of religion are not; it is not self-deprecating, self-disciplined, or self-refuting. Yet there are many different types of strength: strength of body, strength of mind, strength of spirit, etc. It seems possible, therefore, that the Will to Power is not the only possible manifestation of the personal strength that gives life value.

This other form of strength is what I have chosen to call the Will to Humility; it is the desire of each and every adherent to the ascetic ideal to dominate themselves, to control their own bodies and minds. Two separate wills exist in the human mind working against one another. One seeks and the other opposes; in essence, each person possesses

an inner microcosm of the struggle between master and slave morality. Nietzsche's analysis is indeed correct on this point: the slave morality must have a master morality to rebel against. However, this rebellion, unlike the societal-based rebellion of Judaism, is personal; it is a rebellion against whatever norms the self has set up. Herein lies the chief difference between Nietzsche's conclusion and my own: the suppression of the self requires more strength, not less, than the exertion of one's own will.

Consider the ease with which the Will to Power is expressed in everyday life for both needful and needless reasons. St. Augustine points out that babies cry for their needs and exert their will with complete selfishness on those around them; how easily they are able to do so (Augustine 8)! Indeed, they are incapable of anything else. It is precisely because they are weak that their wills are obeyed, not because their wills are of great strength. Later in life, personal desires crop up that may or may not be easily satisfied, given the physical limitations surrounding various situations. Yet the easiest route to take in such a situation is toward the fulfillment of the need or desire; the body's nerves scream for attention, for satisfaction, for whatever it is they want. Pain is an extremely persuasive actor in this case, leading men to submit to the will of others for the promise of the cessation of torment. Pleasure works much the same way, leading men to do just about anything for its creation or increase. Again, St. Augustine serves as a useful example: his boyhood theft of pears was nothing more than an expression of his own will to dominate. How much strength did the act require? Very little; in fact, it did not even require justification. He and his peers wanted to do something, and they did it (31). The act may have required a certain amount of reckless courage, but this strength of will to

act on the "master morality" impulses pales in comparison to that which is needed to overcome such impulses.

To suppress one's own will to power, to humble one's own will, one's own desire to dominate and to survive before the will of others, requires a rebellion against the most powerful forces imaginable: those of the self. With instincts demanding this, with physical stimuli demanding that, with impulses pulling the will in all directions, it requires an enormous strength of will to suppress them all and act in a different way. The resentment of one's own desires must be based in a knowledge that the desires of the flesh are not, in fact, fulfilling; that the Will to Power's constantly changing goals undermine its single persistent goal, the expression of its own strength. To keep the Will to Power suppressed (which is, by Nietzsche's own argument [Nietzsche 97], the most powerful force of will) must require an incomparable amount of strength; the Will to Humility must therefore, in the end, be stronger than the Will to Power. As Nietzsche implies that the life of strength is the only life of value, it follows that the only life of value is, in fact, the life lived by the Will to Humility.

Civil wars are historically the most bloody, the most hard-fought, and the most damaging conflicts; it is no different than with the internal struggle between the Will to Power and the Will to Humility. Nietzsche's arguments against religion in general and Christianity in particular are valid, and his points are backed by solid logic and lucid insights into the development of the human consciousness. Yet in the end, his own admitted closeness to the conflict at hand (151) blinds him to the possibility that the "sickness" of the ascetic ideal may in fact be (indeed, in my opinion, is) an expression not of weakness, but of strength against the Will to Power. A life is valuable when it is lived

with the greatest strength possible, and no strength is greater than that required to suppress one's own instincts, impulses, and will.