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Ressentiment, Value, and Self-Vindication: Making Sense of Nietzsche's Slave Revolt

by R. Jay Wallace

University of California, Berkeley

In its broad outlines the account of the origin of modern morality that Nietzsche offers in the first essay of his Genealogy is reasonably clear. The account begins with the postulation of two different schemes of value, organized around the pairs of opposites good/bad and good/evil, which are associated respectively with the contrasting personality types of the noble and the slave. Characteristic of the slavish personality structure are the negative affects of hatred and ressentiment, which, deprived of a natural outlet, become pent up and fester within the psyche of the powerless until reaching "monstrous and uncanny proportions" (GM, I.7).¹ The slave revolt begins when these sentiments "become creative and give birth to values" (G, I.10), initiating an historical process through which the universalistic, Christianized values of good and evil largely come to supplant the aristocratic values of good and bad.

Though this story is clear enough in its general outlines, however, it is not at all clear how exactly the psychological processes the story describes are really supposed to work. The crux is the causal relation that is posited between the ressentiment of the powerless slaves and the new table of values to which that psychic force allegedly gives rise. There is a natural way of thinking about this

causal nexus—the strategic interpretation, as I shall call it—that makes sense of the basic idea that ressentiment should give rise to the erection of a new table of values, in an event that might accurately be described as a revolt. But I shall argue that the causal links postulated by this interpretation are ultimately untenable, yielding a narrative that is riddled with paradox at the level of both psychic mechanism and social process. We need a different, non-strategic way of understanding how ressentiment could eventuate in Nietzsche's slave revolt, and the main aim of my paper will be to develop such an interpretation. To do so, it will be necessary to think systematically about the nature of ressentiment, and about the psychological situation of those who are subject to this emotion in a conceptual landscape defined by the aristocratic values of good and bad. The key to understanding how a new table of values might emerge under these conditions, I shall argue, is to acknowledge the profound human need for a distinctive kind of self-conception, one that I shall refer to as vindicatory. The ressentiment of the powerless leads them to internalize a new evaluative scheme that makes sense of their basic emotional orientation to the world. This expressive relation between emotion and value, I shall argue, is the crux for understanding Nietzsche's striking claim that the ressentiment of the weak is one of the main sources of modern moral consciousness.

Nietzsche's writings are among the most important documents in our philosophical tradition that grapple with issues in what we now call moral psychology. But not all of his reflections in this vein seem to me to be of equal value. His exploration of asceticism in modern moral consciousness, for instance, has less relevance today than in Nietzsche's own time, as social morality in the western world has moved away from the Victorian emphasis on instinctual self-denial as an end

in itself. Some have celebrated Nietzsche's reflections on the will as examples of a laudably minimalistic or naturalistic approach to understanding the psychological preconditions of morality.² But this part of Nietzsche's ethical writing strikes me as overrated: there are ways of interpreting rational agency and volition that avoid his objections, and that seem superior to the mixture of epiphenomenalism and psychological determinism that he appears to recommend.³ The real strength of Nietzschean moral psychology lies in his insight into the pathological deformations of personality associated with modern moral consciousness, especially where they involve the interplay of emotional forces and evaluative ideals. The account of the emergence of the good/evil table of value out of the ressentiment of the powerless is a brilliant example of this tendency in Nietzsche's polemical critique of modern morality, one that should repay the effort at critical reconstruction that it is my aim in this essay to provide.

1. The Strategic Interpretation.

I want to begin by sketching an interpretation of the psychic mechanisms involved in the slave revolt that seems to me to be implicit in much work on this topic. I am tempted to say that the account I shall describe is the default interpretation of the slave revolt, in part because it gives a clear sense to Nietzsche's characterization of this episode in cultural history as a "revolt", in part because it captures at least some aspects of the complex historical process that Nietzsche is concerned to understand. But the default interpretation cannot be the whole truth about the slave revolt, for reasons that I shall also try to explain.

The psychological force that drives the slave revolt, on any account of it, is the ressentiment of the slaves. The strategic

interpretation understands this emotional orientation primarily in terms of its aim. Ressentiment is a negative affect of hatred on the part of the powerless toward their oppressors, involving the desire to strike out against them, in ways that will harm them and deprive them of their cultural and social advantages. The slave revolt may then be thought of strategically in relation to this fundamental aim, as an undertaking that is precisely calculated to harm the powerful. The inferior position of the powerless means that they are unable to pursue this goal directly, through actions that are immediately damaging to the interests of the powerful. So they resort to a more indirect strategy, erecting a new table of values as a devious way of undermining the position and advantages of the people they despise.

There are several considerations that speak in favor of this strategic reading of the slave revolt. For one thing, Nietzsche himself often writes about the events involved in the slave revolt in strategic terms. He describes the invention of the Christian ethic of love, for instance, as part of a "truly grand politics of revenge" on the part of the Jewish people (G, I.8), suggesting that it was a calculated effort to strike a blow against the oppressors of Israel. To the extent this political characterization is accurate, the slave revolt must involve activities on the part of at least some of its proponents that are conceived of strategically in relation to the goal of harming the powerful masters. The strategic interpretation takes this political dimension of Nietzsche's account to capture the defining moment of the slave revolt, which consists essentially in activities undertaken with the aim of subverting the power and position of those whom the powerless hate.

Furthermore, understanding the slave revolt in these strategic terms fits with other things that Nietzsche prominently says about it.

Thus ressentiment plausibly involves the desire to inflict harm on those at whom it is directed, so the aim that is central to the strategic interpretation is one that ressentiment may be understood to supply. According to the strategic interpretation, ressentiment becomes "creative" when the desire to achieve that aim finally becomes insistent enough to lead to action. And insofar as the actions in question are undertaken with the aim of inflicting harm on the powerful, they can be characterized accurately as a form of revolt. They are attacks on the politically and socially powerful, which are expressly calculated to undermine their position and to harm their central interests.

In these respects, then, the strategic interpretation would seem to recommend itself, as a natural way of understanding the processes that Nietzsche is describing in the first essay of the Genealogy. But the interpretation cannot ultimately be sustained; I want to identify three insuperable difficulties that arise when we think about the slave revolt in the terms that it suggests. First, there is a basic problem that is encountered when we try to make sense of the intentions with which the new table of values was erected. The strategic account interprets this as an activity whose goal is to land a blow against the strong and powerful. It is very hard to understand, however, why anyone would choose to pursue this goal by a strategy so feckless and obscure as the erection of a new table of values. This strategy is reasonable only if the new evaluative scheme is something whose articulation and propagation is likely to damage the interests of the politically and socially powerful. But why should the weak believe that the evaluative activities in which the slave revolt consists would have this effect? If the powerful are truly powerful, they could be expected simply to ignore the evaluative scheme that is proposed as an alternative to

their own, or perhaps to suppress attempts on the part of the weak to advocate in its defense. The strategic interpretation requires that the weak understand the erection of a new table of values in the logic of instrumental rationality, as a course of action that is effective relative to the goal of revenge against the powerful. But unless they are massively deluded, it seems highly unlikely that they would be able to think of their actions in these terms. Doing so simply does not seem to make much sense.

For similar reasons, the strategic interpretation renders mysterious the historical effects of the slave revolt, as Nietzsche describes them. At the end of the seventh section of the first essay in the Genealogy Nietzsche famously remarks that the slave revolt in morality has a history of two thousand years, which we are no longer able to see clearly precisely because it has been victorious. If we think about the revolt in the terms which the strategic interpretation provides, then its victory or success should consist in revenge, where this in turn involves harm or damage to the powerful, of a kind that perhaps eventually leads to their virtual elimination. But why should the erection of a new table of values have had this effect? One would think the truly powerful would simply brush aside the new evaluative rhetoric of the slaves, or crush politically the weak and slavish people who resort to such rhetoric in daily life. In short, the considerations that make it mysterious why the weak would think of their actions as effective means of revenge against the powerful equally render mysterious the postulated success of those actions over the centuries.⁴

There is a third difficulty, however, that is even more serious than the first two problems I have described. This is that the slave revolt becomes a self-undermining process if we conceptualize it in the

terms that the strategic interpretation proposes. To this point I have spoken of the slave revolt as involving the erection of a new table of values, as if this were a mere act of rhetoric or transparent propagandizing. But it is clear that Nietzsche does not understand the revolt in such superficial terms as these. It occurs, he says, when ressentiment becomes creative and gives birth to values, and this process involves more than merely the invention of a new discourse or set of evaluative terms. Values come into existence only to the extent a new discourse of value is internalized and taken seriously, as a framework for organizing life and experience. An evaluative framework of this kind leads one to prefer some things to others, shaping one's deliberations about action, and providing a basis for criticizing social institutions and individual behavior. But the erection of a new table of values, to the extent it is undertaken with the aim of exacting revenge against the powerful, would precisely fail to give rise to values in this sense.

To see this, we need only note that the new values are supposed to take root in precisely the population whose members are subject to pent-up hatred and ressentiment. The strategic interpretation takes these emotions to supply the powerless with a goal—the destruction of the noble class—that the invention of new values is calculated to bring about. But the strategic understanding of the revolt on the part of the slaves undermines the very processes that the revolt itself is supposed to consist in. We can speak of the invention of new values only insofar as the scheme organized around the opposition between good and evil comes to be internalized by the slaves, as a comprehensive framework of the sort described above. A scheme that the slaves themselves understand in strategic terms, however, cannot really play this role in their lives. To the extent the scheme is viewed strategically, as an

instrument of revenge, it cannot function as a fundamental framework for preference, deliberation and criticism. And to the extent it plays these roles, it cannot be viewed by the agent whose experience it fundamentally shapes as a device that is calculated to bring about revenge.⁵

It might be thought that these difficulties can be avoided if we postulate—as Nietzsche's text would seem to allow—that the strategic calculation involved in the slave revolt occurs at the level of unconscious psychic processes. Perhaps the slaves are not really aware that they embrace the evaluative scheme of good and evil as a way of achieving revenge against the powerful. In that event they might fully internalize those values while remaining ignorant of the strategic goals that the process of internalization was originally calculated to achieve. I would agree that Nietzschean ressentiment operates beneath the radar of consciousness in the slave revolt, and also that there are conflicts and tensions between the unconscious forces that sustain modern morality and the content of the values in which that morality consists. But these facts do not suffice to remove the problem I have been attributing to the strategic interpretation. For one thing, the unconscious motives at work on the strategic interpretation still involve the aim of achieving revenge against the powerful, and it remains obscure why the slavish should believe at any level, conscious or unconscious, that their invention of a new table of values is likely to advance this aim. (This is a further application of the first objection canvassed above.)

Moreover, it seems implausible to suppose that the unconscious processes at work in Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt follow the linear logic of instrumental rationality that is central to the strategic interpretation. Those in the grip of ressentiment and hatred

may well have desires to harm and thwart the powerful that they are not fully aware of, at the level of conscious reflection. But it would be peculiar if unconscious forces of this kind operated to sustain the values of modern morality through calculations centered on the relation between means and ends. Unconscious processes tend to follow more primitive logics of association, expression, and symbolic representation. The question is, how exactly might such unconscious processes be involved in the Nietzschean narrative of the origins of modern morality?

2. The Expressive Interpretation.

The strategic interpretation sees the meaning of the slave revolt as lying in its instrumental relation to an end that is given by ressentiment. The aim it attributes to ressentiment, namely to inflict harm on the hated masters, seems one that genuinely belongs to it. But ressentiment is more than merely a desire to inflict harm or suffering on someone. How exactly ressentiment goes beyond a mere desire to harm is not something that Nietzsche himself spells out very explicitly.⁶ To make sense of the role Nietzsche ascribes to this emotion, we need to supplement the letter of his texts with an independent examination of phenomenon to which he is drawing attention, situating ressentiment more precisely in relation to other social sentiments and reactions. By attending systematically to the circumstances that plausibly nurture this complex emotional phenomenon, I shall argue that we can arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of the causal role of ressentiment in generating and sustaining the new evaluative framework of good and evil.

Ressentiment can be understood as a general emotional orientation of the person. It emerges under conditions in which people find

themselves systematically deprived of things that they want very much to possess, without any prospects for improvement in this respect. But systematic deprivation is not sufficient for the emergence of ressentiment. If everyone was equally subject to a condition in which they are denied coveted goods—as for instance in a natural emergency, such as a devastating famine or earthquake—the result might be a tendency to feelings of rage, frustration, and depression in the populace at large, but not the kind of focused hatred characteristic of ressentiment. For the latter emotions to emerge, there need to be some people who are singled out from the rest in not being deprived of the coveted goods, and who are publicly known not to be deprived. The Ur-context of ressentiment is one in which some people have things that you very much desire, but that you lack and feel yourself unable ever to obtain. Thus Nietzsche's slaves are systematically excluded from enjoying many of the desirable things that the masters in their society have in abundance, including status, material possessions, and above all political power and influence.⁷ Ressentiment is fundamentally occasioned by invidious comparisons of this kind.

In the circumstances that give rise to it ressentiment bears some similarity to envy, which is also about a person's lack of access to goods that others are conspicuously able to enjoy. But envy does not have the quality of intense and focused malice that distinguishes ressentiment. It seems perfectly possible to envy someone their wealth or professional good fortune, say, without wishing them ill or feeling any particularly negative affect toward them personally. Envy of this variety might be structured by the thought, "I'm just as good or deserving as he is", and one can entertain this thought without believing that the target of envy is unworthy or undeserving in any way; nor does this emotion require one to feel hostility or hatred

toward the person who is envied. These latter forms of focused negative affect, which seem very much characteristic of Nietzschean ressentiment, emerge under circumstances that structurally prevent a person from ever coming to enjoy the desired goods that the more fortunate have access to in abundance.⁸ Ordinary envy might well be assuaged by one's coming into possession of the desirable items that one formerly lacked, as when a person finally wins the raise or the professional standing that they took themselves all along to deserve. Envy grows into ressentiment when ordinary rectification of this kind is (believed to be) impossible, because one is systematically prevented by one's nature or one's circumstances from acquiring the things that one so covetously desires.

Nietzsche shows great psychological insight in his assumptions about the transformation that envy undergoes under conditions that involve structural deprivation of this kind. The intensification of hatred into which envy grows becomes focused specifically on the persons who are comparatively privileged; though it is occasioned by relative disadvantage, it is no longer really about the fact of relative disadvantage, but about the individuals who are advantaged, whom the unfortunate come to despise. But why should envy come to assume this quality of personal hatred under conditions of this kind? What explains its transformation into an affect that is essentially focused and personal in the way I have described? This question may not have any very deep or illuminating answer. The process through which ordinary envy turns into the kind of personal animus involved in ressentiment cannot plausibly be traced to any further emotion or complex of ideas. It seems to me a primitive mechanism, one that can perhaps be understood to reflect our deeply social nature, our nearly obsessive concern for our relative standing within local and less local

communities. Under conditions of structural deprivation, in which we permanently lack access to what Rawls calls the social bases of self-respect, the ordinary tendency to envy may be transformed into something quite different: an intensely personal loathing of those who are more fortunate than we are.

This focused emotional orientation toward the fortunate involves the desire to lash out at them that was discussed in the preceding section of this paper. The strategic interpretation correctly attributes desires of this kind to the slavish types in whom ressentiment flourishes. But it goes wrong in its account of the relation between such desires and the new table of values to which ressentiment gives rise. The fundamental emotional dynamic of the slave revolt is not the selection of means to an end that is set by one's desires. It is the expression of one's negative emotional orientation toward the powerful, in the embrace of an evaluative framework that makes sense of that basic orientation.⁹

To understand this emotional dynamic, we need to reflect on the situation of the powerless in the period immediately preceding the invention of the new table of values. Ressentiment has festered within these people for years, building up to the point where it becomes the dominant emotional orientation of their lives. This involves a concentration of hatred and hostility directed toward the people in their society who are powerful, successful, and outwardly flourishing. At the same time, the evaluative framework that is available under these cultural conditions characterizes the objects of this concentrated negative affect as precisely good in a superlative degree. In the terms of the evaluative schema of good and bad, it is the aristocratic masters who are paradigms of positive value, and the characteristics that distinguish them from the rabble—their superior

discernment, independence, confidence, and so on—are singled out for praise and celebration. So the powerless find themselves in a conceptual situation in which the negative affect that dominates their emotional lives is directed at individuals whom they themselves seem compelled to regard as exemplars of value and worthy of admiration. This is a highly unstable combination of attitudes, one which is antithetical to the slaves' ability to make sense of their own deepest emotional experience.

In my view, the slave revolt should be understood as a response on the part of the slavish to this psychic tension.¹⁰ The weak are subject to attitudes that color their experience of the social world, in ways that cannot be reconciled with the dominant ethical ideology that they themselves have so far accepted. So they come to embrace a new and more congenial scheme of values. This new evaluative scheme is the expression of their underlying ressentiment, insofar as its adoption can be explained in terms of that emotional orientation, which is postulated to be prior to it in the order of causation. Ressentiment becomes creative and gives birth to values when the tensions that attend it lead the powerless to adopt and internalize a wholly new evaluative framework. The causal nexus linking ressentiment to this new framework does not follow the logic of means/end rationality, but the more archaic pattern of emotional self-interpretation. The slaves adopt the scheme of values organized around good and evil, because doing so enables them to make sense of their experience of the world, which is mediated by the sentiments of hatred and ressentiment. If the masters are evil, then hatred of them becomes a response that is merited by its object, and the latent tensions in the world view of the slaves are thereby resolved.

This way of understanding the causal role of ressentiment in the slave revolt—the expressive interpretation, as I shall call it—has several immediate advantages. For one thing, it makes very good sense of some of the more prominent strands in Nietzsche’s reflections about the slave revolt. Nietzsche emphasizes repeatedly, for instance, that the negative pole is basic in the morality of good and evil, and he contrasts the resulting scheme in this respect with the more affirmative morality of good and bad. The concept of evil, Nietzsche says, is “the original thing, the beginning, the distinctive deed in the conception of a slave morality” (GM, I.11, p. 40; cf. GM, I.10). This fits well with the idea that the slavish scheme has its origin in the need to make sense of the essentially hostile affect of ressentiment. The problem to which the new morality is a response is the fact that this hostile orientation is directed at objects that have heretofore been regarded as superlatively good. What is required, in light of this problem, is a different way of conceptualizing the landscape of value, one that represents the objects of ressentiment as worthy of this kind of negative orientation. By coming to see them as evil, one can experience one’s own deep hostility as something that is appropriate to its object, and to the extent this is the case the category of evil is indeed the “original thing...in the conception of a slave morality.” It is the original thing in the sense that the invention of this category is what most basically resolves the psychic tension to which the slave revolt is a response.

Furthermore, the expressive interpretation attributes a plausible causal role to the unconscious forces of hatred and ressentiment. These are pictured as combining with the prevailing ethical framework of good and bad to create a situation of acute psychic tension and instability. The powerless might not be fully aware that they are in the grip of

ressentiment, but the focused and intense hatred it involves will inevitably color their experience profoundly, in ways that sit very uneasily with the dominant ethical ideology of good and bad. Under these circumstances their whole emotional orientation toward the social world will be fraught with latent tension and conflict; it will not cohere with the values that they themselves accept and attempt to live by, and this tension and conflict will be experienced as forms of anxiety, discomfort, and alienation. The contribution that the new table of values makes is essentially to resolve this acute psychic discomfort, something that is likely to be experienced by the weak as profoundly satisfying. This is the primitive dynamic of self-interpretation to which I earlier referred, and the supposition that unconscious processes might operate in accordance with this dynamic has the ring of truth to it.¹¹

This is one respect in which the account I have proposed seems clearly superior to the strategic interpretation, with its postulation of unconscious calculation about means and ends. But Nietzsche clearly does use the language of strategic agency in his discussions of the slave revolt. To take just one example, the "revaluation of values" in which the slave revolt consists is characterized by him as "an act of the most spiritual revenge" (GM, I.7, p. 34), a characterization that suggests calculation with the aim of striking out against the masters. How is this tendency in Nietzsche's theory to be reconciled with the expressive interpretation, which understands the slave revolt in fundamentally non-strategic terms?

To answer this question, we need first to think about Nietzsche's suggestion that the erection of a new table of values amounts to a revolt. This political language acquires a straightforward meaning on the strategic interpretation, which represents the powerless as engaged

in a course of action whose avowed aim is to strike a blow at the masters, and hence as a kind of uprising. The expressive interpretation, by contrast, treats the erection of new moral values in non-strategic terms, as in the first instance a response to psychic tensions internal to the outlook of the slavish. A psychological process of this kind would not seem to be political in its overt meaning or in the intentions with which it is carried out. But it might nevertheless inadvertently be a process of great political significance, carrying political meanings in its effects if not in its intent, and this is the way I would suggest we think about Nietzsche's talk of revolt. The response to the pent up tension that the powerless experience is their invention of a new ethical vocabulary, where this is to be understood not as a cynical rhetorical display, but as the acceptance and internalization of a new evaluative framework for organizing their responses to the world. To take this step, under the conditions that prevail at the time of the slave revolt, is in effect to challenge the authority of the masters to be the final arbiters in questions of value. Their verdicts about what is good and bad are no longer taken as valid or regulative for the responses of everyone, and to the extent this is the case their superior standing in normative questions will have been called into question. By challenging the normative authority of the masters in this way, the slaves may be thought of as having initiated a revolt, even if it was not their conscious or implicit aim to do so.

In the preceding section I raised the question of how the slave revolt could possibly have succeeded over time, in the way Nietzsche clearly believes that it has. If the revolt is the attempt to strike out directly against the masters by erecting a new evaluative scheme, it is hard to understand how it might have been successful on its own

terms; the superior position of the masters should have ensured their immunity to the effect the slaves were—however obscurely—aiming to achieve. On the alternative interpretation I have proposed, the central moment of revolt is not the immediate attempt to inflict physical or psychic harm on those who are powerful, but rather the challenge to their normative authority that is implicit in the acceptance of a radically new evaluative framework. If this is what the revolt essentially consists in, however, then we get a very different and more intelligible account of its eventual success. The challenge to the authority of the masters will have been successful when they are no longer taken to be the final arbiters in questions of value. For this condition to be achieved, it is only necessary that more and more people come over time to internalize the new table of values organized around the concepts of good and evil. How this might occur is not at all difficult to understand. Supposing that the new values really do fit well with the psychic structures characteristic of pent-up ressentiment, it is only natural that they would take firm root among the oppressed and frustrated masses in urbanized European culture, coming eventually to be the dominant evaluative schema for individual deliberation and social criticism.

In thinking about this historical process, there is no need to suppose, initially at any rate, that the strong types should themselves accept the new values of the slavish masses, in a process akin to religious conversion. This would represent a direct capitulation to slave morality, something that would indeed be hard to make sense of as the deliberate act of a genuinely higher nature. Nevertheless the cultural authority of the strong will effectively be undermined, and their broader interests thereby damaged, when the alternative value system they espouse has been eclipsed and marginalized through the

dominance in the population at large of modern, Christianized morality.¹² Moreover, once this process has been set in motion, we may suppose that it will have further, indirect effects over time on the ability of those with the native capacity for distinction to realize their true potential. Thus Nietzsche suggests that the ideological parameters of modern life, in which a large majority have taken to heart a system of values that supports leveling, democratic, egalitarian policies and practices, are inimical to the emergence and development of higher individuals.¹³ Under these social conditions, there will be fewer and fewer truly distinguished specimens of humanity, the natural successors to the aristocratic nobles of an earlier era. Furthermore, such higher types as are able to emerge will lack the confidence of their predecessors; their thinking will inevitably be corrupted by the ethical orthodoxy under which they came to maturity, which will leave traces in their own evaluative outlook.¹⁴ These outcomes are for Nietzsche a potential source of nihilistic despair about modern culture, and at least one basis for his multifaceted criticism of the slave morality that is prevalent in that culture (cf. GM, I.11, I.12).¹⁵

With this account of the slave revolt in hand, let us now return to the issue of Nietzsche's strategic descriptions of the processes in which the revolt consists. The most important thing to note about this issue is that Nietzsche distinguishes clearly between the masses of ressentiment-filled slaves, and a smaller group, the so-called priestly aristocracy, whose relation to the slavish masses is complicated. On the one hand, the priests are described as having an emotional orientation to the social world that has much in common with the powerless masses. It is in them, for instance, that hatred is said to have grown to "monstrous and uncanny proportions" (GM, I.7, p. 33), a

hatred that stems primarily from their impotence vis-à-vis the noble warrior class. In this respect, then, the aristocratic priests would seem to share with the masses the kind of ressentiment that is rooted in a situation of irremediable structural deprivation. On the other hand, the priests are precisely unlike the powerless masses in constituting an aristocracy of their own. They are a group apart from the masses, being superior to them in qualities of mind and character, in ways that make it fitting to speak of them in the language of nobility.

Now it is striking that Nietzsche's strategic descriptions of the slave revolt apply primarily to the activities of the priestly aristocracy. Thus it is the Jewish priestly class that is said to have practiced a "secret black art of truly grand politics of revenge, of a farseeing, subterranean, slowly advancing, and premeditated revenge" in advancing the new table of values (GM, I.8, p. 35; cf. GM, I.7). This can be reconciled with my expressive interpretation of the slave revolt in the following way. We may suppose that it is a reflection of the superiority of the priestly aristocracy that its members take a clear-eyed, strategic attitude toward the processes in which the slave revolt basically consists. Those processes involve the acceptance and internalization of a new set of values, on the part of a populace whose deepest emotional experience is thereby rendered intelligible. I have argued that this emotional dynamic would not succeed if the powerless masses viewed the new table of values in strategic terms, as something to be advocated solely as a way of striking a blow against the master class. The aristocratic priests, I now want to suggest, grasp the susceptibility of the masses to this dynamic, and exploit it expressly for the purpose of undermining the power and position of the warrior class. That is, without really accepting the new table of values

themselves, they cynically advocate on its behalf, in the expectation that the values will catch on over time among the masses who join with them in resenting the power of the political aristocracy.¹⁶ There is, in other words, a strategic dimension to the slave revolt, but strategic rationality does not capture the primary psychological dynamic in which that revolt consists. It is rather a secondary or parasitic phenomenon, which characterizes the thinking not of the masses in whose psyches the revolt takes place, but only of an elite group, the priestly aristocracy.

In at least one respect, however, it may be misleading to characterize the strategic calculations of the priestly class as a secondary phenomenon in relation to the slave revolt. Nietzsche often represents the priestly nobility as the driving force behind the revolt. In section I.7 of the Genealogy, for instance, he says that it was the Jews ("that priestly people") "who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation" (p. 34), a statement that suggests that the priests played the leading role in the revaluation of values. Similarly, in Beyond Good and Evil (sec. 261) Nietzsche apparently denies that the slaves have it in them to create values, suggesting that this is uniquely the prerogative of those who are by nature masters. But this strand too can be reconciled with my interpretation. We may suppose that it was the priests who originally thought to invert the noble values of good and bad, articulating for the first time a different way of conceptualizing the landscape of value. To the extent this is the case, we may say that they created the new values, and that their act of creation is temporally prior in the chain of events in which the slave revolt consists. At the same time, however, this act of creation would not have succeeded in bringing new values into existence unless there were

other people in the world who were emotionally primed to internalize the new evaluative vocabulary that the priests had invented. It is for this reason that I described the role of the priests as secondary. Their genius can be said to consist in the invention of an ideology that is precisely calculated by them to mesh with the emotional orientation of the oppressed masses. They thus deliberately set in motion and nurture the expressive processes through which the slaves come to embrace a new evaluative scheme, processes that constitute, strictly speaking, the true birth of new values.¹⁷

This account of the role of the ascetic priests attributes to them a devious plan to achieve genuine revenge against the masters whom they hate, a revenge that involves harming the masters, and undermining their comparative cultural authority and political and social advantages. At times, however, Nietzsche appears to describe the revenge that is involved in the slave revolt in less literal terms. Of the psychic force that becomes creative and gives birth to new values, for instance, he says that it is "the ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge" (GM, I.10, p. 36). Here he seems to be talking about the very force that is at work in the expressive dynamic I have been discussing in this section, the ressentiment of the masses that leads them to embrace the new values of good and evil. In what sense can their doing this be characterized as compensation for their literal impotence, through a revenge that is merely imaginary?

There is nothing particularly mysterious about the idea that thoughts and fantasies can provide psychic gratification for a person whose options for action are in reality limited. Gratifications of this kind belong to the archaic logic of unconscious processes, which operate in accordance with assumptions about the "omnipotence of

thought" that are characteristic of infantile mental life. We all experience pleasures that reflect the continuing latent operation of these patterns of thinking in adult life, as for instance when we indulge in sadistic fantasizing about someone who has done us wrong, or daydream about the victory of the political party that we have been working in vain to support all these years. It would be no surprise if the unconscious ressentiment of the masses provided a source for archaic satisfactions of this kind, involving an imaginary revenge against the powerful who are the objects of this focused negative affect.¹⁸

The more interesting question is why the internalization of the new table of values should provide an occasion for the operation of this kind of mental process. To do so, it would need to involve a representation of the powerful in thought, as suffering the kind of harm or comeuppance that might be imagined as revenge. But it is not at all clear why Nietzsche might have thought that the slave revolt itself involves representations of this sort. As a result of the revolt the slaves come to think of the powerful masters as supremely evil, but to think of them in these terms is not to represent them (either consciously or unconsciously) as having been harmed or undermined in any way.¹⁹ Perhaps Nietzsche supposes that the powerless are dimly aware of their new moral scheme as a challenge to the authority of the masters; building on this dim awareness, they might imagine themselves to be striking out against the masters in doing something that eventually will undermine their superior position. This is reminiscent of the strategic interpretation, with the difference that the act of harming the masters is not part of a postulated unconscious calculation, but rather something that is fantasized about by the slaves.²⁰

A different and more likely possibility is that the element of fantasized revenge is not so directly connected to the acceptance of new values in which the slave revolt consists. After all, in the passage quoted above Nietzsche does not strictly say that the slave revolt itself is a form of imaginary revenge, only that it is the result of the kind of ressentiment that compensates for impotence through such revenge. Perhaps Nietzsche is merely noting that the same psychic force that becomes creative in the slave revolt also finds expression in other forms of modern Christianized thought, ones that involve fantasies in which the powerful are brought low and made to suffer. The most obvious example would be Christian stories about damnation and the last judgment, such as the remarkable passage from Tertullian that Nietzsche quotes extensively toward the end of the first essay of the Genealogy (GM, I.15). On this reading, which I myself would favor, the element of imaginary revenge is not really integral to the slave revolt itself, but rather a by-product of the unconscious psychic forces that are primarily at work in the creation of new values, and further evidence of their pervasive presence and operation.

III. Value and Emotion.

The expressive interpretation seems to me to make good sense of the central processes that Nietzsche is describing in the first essay of the Genealogy. But there are large philosophical questions that the interpretation raises, questions that need to be grappled with before we can really take seriously the account Nietzsche is offering of the role of ressentiment in giving birth to new moral values. In this section I shall address four sets of issues.

A first question concerns the primacy of ressentiment vis-à-vis value. Nietzsche's genetic story assumes that the powerless are subject to ressentiment before they embrace the values that are organized around the pair of opposites good and evil. This emotional orientation becomes pent up in the psyches of the weak, growing ever more intense until it finally gives birth to new values in the slave revolt. It is the priority of ressentiment, its temporal precedence and logical independence from modern values, that enables us to explain the acceptance of those values by appeal to this emotional state. But it is not clear that we can really make sense of ressentiment as an emotional condition that is independent of an evaluative framework or point of view.

There are in fact two aspects to this potential difficulty. One is the general concern that ressentiment, like many emotional states or conditions, makes sense only against the background of an evaluative commitment of some kind or other. Pride, for instance, presupposes that one takes oneself to have done or produced something that is good and worthy of admiration, while shame is an emotional response to an aspect of oneself that one views with dismay, as vicious, or disfigured, or base. If ressentiment is like these emotions in presupposing an evaluative framework, then it may be doubted whether we can appeal to it to account for the adoption by the slaves of the values through which they view the world. A second and related aspect of this problem is that some of the specific values potentially associated with ressentiment seem at odds with the new values that the emotion is said to give rise to. Thus it seems that we experience ressentiment toward people when they are in a conspicuously good way in comparison to ourselves, and when we feel that we are prevented from realizing the goods that they exhibit or manifest in a striking degree. This suggests

that the target of ressentiment must be conceptualized in positive terms, as possessing things or properties that are worthy of admiration and pursuit. But this positive evaluation of the targets of ressentiment is precisely at odds with the negative assessment of them that is integral to the morality of good and evil. To express the problem as a paradox, ressentiment appears to presuppose the very values that are repudiated in the slave revolt; but then the new table of values that is internalized by the slaves would preclude them from feeling the very sentiment that is supposed to find expression in their act of revolt.²¹

These problems can be illustrated by looking at two emotions that are superficially similar to Nietzschean ressentiment, namely resentment and envy. Resentment is a reactive sentiment that is bound up with our tendency to hold people morally accountable for their actions. Its distinctive feature—at least this is what I have elsewhere argued²²—is its connection to moral demands. In the paradigm cases, one resents another person when one believes that they have wronged one, doing something that violates a moral obligation to which one holds them in one's interpersonal relations. If this is right however then resentment is an essentially moral sentiment, presupposing the acceptance of moral standards on the part of the agent who is subject to the emotion. An emotion with this structure clearly cannot be called on to explain the agent's fundamental moral outlook, since an outlook of that kind is implicated in the emotion itself. Similarly, many episodes of common envy seem to be occasioned by one's awareness of the person envied as good or admirable in some way or other. One envies the person who is supremely confident in social situations (when one is not oneself), or who is sharp or clever or successful or unusually attractive. Here the danger is that the emotion is bound up with a

positive evaluative assessment of its target, in a way that is at odds with the superlatively negative evaluation in which the emotion finds expression in the slave revolt.

But Nietzschean ressentiment is precisely unlike both resentment and ordinary envy in these respects. As interpreted in the preceding section, it is a kind of focused hatred that grows out of a situation of structural comparative deprivation, and its essential features are psychically primitive by comparison with both moralized resentment and common envy. To be subject to this sentiment, one needs to conceptualize oneself as lacking access to things that other people in one's social world conspicuously possess, where this is experienced as a kind of deprivation. Deprivation might in turn appear to be an evaluatively-laden concept, implying that the things one lacks access to are good or valuable along some dimension. But it does not need to be evaluatively-colored in this way. To experience oneself as deprived by comparison to others it is enough that there are things that one simply desires to possess, things that other people have and that are unattainable for oneself. In these terms, the psychic structure of Nietzschean ressentiment might involve a susceptibility to elemental desire or longing, the kind of brute urge observable in young children when they strike out at their siblings or make off with their playmates' toys. If it makes sense to attribute such primitive desires to adult human beings, then a conceptual framework will be in place that will make possible the kinds of experiences that give rise to Nietzschean ressentiment. There is no need to postulate that the slavish evaluate the powerful as genuinely good, still less need we assume that they take themselves to have been wronged by those whom they come to hate, in the style characteristic of moralized resentment.²³

The crux, then, is the idea that the powerless masses are subject to a kind of longing or desire to possess things that is intelligible independently of evaluative concepts and attitudes. If this idea is plausible, then we can make sense of their ressentiment as a phenomenon that is primary vis-à-vis the value system that the emotion is invoked to explain. Now I myself do not believe that ordinary, conscious desire really is intelligible apart from an evaluative point of view.²⁴ But we should recall that Nietzschean ressentiment is not among the surface phenomena of mental life; it is rather an unconscious state of mind, which colors the agent's experience of the world without reaching to the level of full conscious awareness. It seems to me quite likely that the desiderative states operative at this unconscious level of psychic functioning are states of archaic bare striving to possess, states that do not imply the acceptance or application of evaluative concepts on the part of the agent in their grip. If this right however then psychic structures would seem to be in place that render intelligible the kind of ressentiment that Nietzsche's explanatory narrative requires. The experience of structural deprivation that is essential to ressentiment can be made sense of in terms of the frustration of archaic desire, and the priority of ressentiment vis-à-vis evaluation that Nietzsche assumes can thus be maintained.

A second set of questions about Nietzsche's account concerns the gratification that I have suggested would be occasioned by the acceptance and internalization of new values on the part of those in the grip of ressentiment. The idea is that these values would speak to an unconscious need to which the powerless are subject, enabling them to make sense of their basic emotional orientation to the social world, as one that is appropriate to its immediate object. But this idea may seem to sit uneasily with a different strand in Nietzsche's account of

modern morality, his depiction of it as a kind of pathology. It seems clear that Nietzsche views the Christian morality of good and evil, especially in its asceticized form, as a fundamentally unhealthy psychic formation, one that is inimical to the forces necessary to sustain life itself, and a cause of exquisite suffering and torment. The evaluative framework of good and evil allows the powerless to characterize their hated enemies in superlatively negative terms. But its requirements, especially in the "moralized" and "ascetic" guise they assume over time, also become instruments for rechanneling aggressive energies back against the self who is their original subject (GM, II.21, III.15). These energies, which first come on the scene as responses to suffering (GM, III.15, p. 127), thus become co-opted into a psychic economy that intensifies the suffering to which they originally were a response, leading Nietzsche to describe asceticized Christian morality as "the true calamity in the history of European health" (GM, III.21, p. 143; cf. GM, II.19).²⁵

This interpretation of modern moral consciousness as a profound pathology, a device for the internalization of aggressive instincts that intensifies the suffering of those who are in its grip, may seem hard to reconcile with the idea that the same evaluative framework originally served to gratify a psychic need on the part of the slaves. But in fact these aspects of modern morality are not really incompatible with the expressive account I have been developing. Nietzsche himself is always alert to the ways in which a single phenomenon can bear multiple meanings, having causal consequences (for instance) that are multifaceted, and that ultimately work at cross purposes. In the case at hand the supposition would be that a phenomenon that originates in the satisfaction of a psychic need might at the same time, through an instantiation of the law of unintended

consequences, be disadvantageous in relation to other psychic processes, and hence a source of both gratification and suffering. Thus modern moral values might be adopted because they enable the weak to make sense of their emotional experience of the world, even though those same values become co-opted into a system for intensifying the torment of the agent who is in their grip.

Given the deleterious consequences Nietzsche attributes to the Christianized morality of modernity, it would in fact be highly peculiar if it did not gratify some psychic need on the part of the masses who have embraced it, and the drive to make sense of one's emotional situation seems well-suited to play this role. Nietzsche invokes a similar drive at the end of the third essay of the Genealogy, noting that the incorporation of ascetic ideals into Christian morality enables the suffering to make sense of their condition, presumably as one that is deserved on account of their inherently sinful nature (GM, III.28).²⁶ On my interpretation, essentially the same drive (or "will") to understand and to attach meaning to one's situation is at work in the original transformation of ressentiment into a new evaluative scheme.

In both contexts in which it appears to play a role, the need for meaning operates in a distinctive way. In particular, it does not give rise to a clear-eyed or scientific understanding of the psychic forces actually at work in the people who seek to make sense of their situation in the world; their internalized aggression and ressentiment remain, to a large extent, beneath the surface of consciousness. What happens, instead, is that the powerless masses are led to think about themselves in terms that are essentially evaluative, and that therefore provide a kind of vindication of their most fundamental ways of experiencing the world. Thus suffering acquires a meaning under the

ascetic interpretation of morality, becoming a cosmically just condition, one that is peculiarly fitting for the profoundly sinful natures we take ourselves to be.²⁷ Similarly, the interpretation of the powerful masters as embodiments of evil enables the slavish masses to make sense of their emotional experience, insofar as the immediate object of their ressentiment can be thought of in terms that render this powerful sentiment peculiarly appropriate. The evaluative self-conception that is made possible by these forms of moral consciousness I shall call vindicatory, since its point is to provide a kind of justification for the conditions of life that are characteristic of the suffering masses.

This aspect of Nietzsche's position, however, raises a third set of questions. For one thing, there is something puzzling about the claim that the evaluative scheme of good and evil provides a vindication of the slaves' emotional experience. For the new values to which the slave revolt gives rise have a content that condemns the very emotion that originally motivated them and that continues to sustain them over time. This is the aspect of Nietzsche's narrative that has led some to see it as delivering the materials for a kind of internal critique of modern moral consciousness. Thus from the standpoint of one committed to such Christian values as patience, humility, pacifism, and justice, it would presumably be an embarrassment to learn that the psychic forces that sustain these very commitments amount to forms of personal hatred and ressentiment. Far from vindicating the slave's emotions, the new table of values actually appears to undermine their moral legitimacy.

This is correct as far as it goes, but it is not grounds for rejecting the expressive account. The inconsistency it reveals is not a feature of my interpretation of the slave revolt, but of the outlook of

the slaves in whom the expressive processes take place. Thus it is a matter of surface paradox rather than psychic impossibility that the values embraced in the slave revolt should provide a basis for criticizing the very emotions that gave rise to those values in the first place.²⁸ The emotional experience of the slaves is vindicated through the adoption of values that brand the hated masters as evil. But those same values, if consistently applied in an exercise of honest self-assessment, would lead the slaves to lament their original susceptibility to the feelings of ressentiment that so deeply color their experience.²⁹ That the evaluative and emotional structure they inhabit is unstable in this way is part of what makes their predicament so highly problematic, on Nietzsche's account of it. There is no way for them to satisfy completely their desire for self-vindication while confronting the whole truth about their own emotional situation.

But why is it that human beings need self-vindication of this kind? What accounts for the drive to make sense of one's condition and orientation in evaluative terms, as one that is appropriate, or just, or fitting? I am not certain that there is a good Nietzschean answer to this question, at the end of the day. It might simply be a contingent psychological fact that many people need to understand themselves in this way, as subject to conditions that can be made sense of through the lens of an evaluative framework. As an empirical generalization this would seem to be a plausible hypothesis, which receives some confirmation from such common phenomena as psychological rationalization. The alacrity with which people grasp at specious justifications for their political preferences and personal behavior is remarkable, and suggests the operation of a deep need to think of oneself in terms that provide vindication for one's attitudes and behavior.

But is this psychic need really so prevalent a feature of human life? Consider the outlook of the priestly aristocracy. I have suggested that the members of this class should be understood as taking an essentially cynical attitude toward the slave revolt that they foment in the masses. Without themselves accepting the new values of good and evil, they encourage the powerless to accept and internalize those values, seeing this as part of a strategy to undermine the masters over time. This strategic orientation of the priests to the slave revolt seems to assume that they are able to accept their hatred of the masters for what it is, without needing to accept the vindictory self-narrative to which the ordinary masses cling. They are simply people who despise the powerful masters, for no other and no better reason than that the masters are in possession of things that they too would like to possess, but that they have no access to. And so they strike out against the masters, acting strategically with the aim of inflicting harm on them and eventually undermining their superior position entirely.

Indeed, it seems plausible to assume that the ability to understand and accept their true emotional orientation on its own terms, without seeing it as justified by or appropriate to its circumstances, may be a sign of the higher nature of the priests in comparison to the powerless masses. They form a kind of aristocracy precisely insofar as they are not driven to internalize an evaluative rationalization of their essentially hostile emotional experience of the world. It would not be quite accurate, however, to conclude from this that the priests feel no need whatsoever to accept a vindictory interpretation of themselves. Nietzsche in fact writes as if the need for this kind of self-conception were a fairly universal feature of human psychology, treating it as perhaps the most fundamental

manifestation of the will to power that he virtually identifies with life itself. Thus even the original valuations of the aristocratic warrior class, through which the scheme of values good/bad is articulated, are described as serving as instruments of self-glorification.³⁰ Similarly, insofar as the priests are able to see themselves as striking a strategic blow against the hated masters, they will be able to make sense of their experience in terms of the aristocratic values that they continue to accept. Their hatred might not ultimately be justified by intrinsic features of its object, but because they take positive action against the masters, they can understand themselves as exhibiting the kind of self-assertion and strength that the noble table of values precisely celebrates. Their good fortune by comparison with the slaves consists in part in their ability to construct a vindictory narrative of their own situation in the world while retaining a kind of clarity about their own psychic needs and emotions that is missing in the benighted masses.

A final set of questions I want to touch on concerns the metaphysics of value that Nietzsche's account of the creative dimension of ressentiment requires. Nietzsche's immediate interest, it seems clear, is in the relation of evaluative structures to the emotions and experiences of the person who accepts them. Values are not thought of as systems of propositions that might be considered true or false representations of an independent domain of evaluative fact; rather they are interpreted as expressions of distinctive personality types, and assessed by reference to their effects on the persons who accept and internalize them. This general way of approaching questions about value is suggestive of a kind of anti-realism, which denies that there are any independent facts of the matter about values or norms. And Nietzsche has in fact been interpreted along these lines, as (for

instance) an anti-realist about (non-prudential) value, who holds that there are no objective facts about good and evil, because such facts are not needed to explain the psychological phenomena that Nietzsche is primarily interested in.³¹ Raymond Geuss offers a pithy statement of this outlook in the following summary of Nietzsche's metaethical position: "In the final analysis there is just the mass of human individuals and groups exercising power or being dominated, succeeding or failing at various projects, and, at a slightly eccentric angle to this world of direct action, a flux of admiration of various things by various people and of disgust at various things by various people who have or have not tried and have or have not succeeded in influencing their own reactions of admiration and disgust."³²

There are numerous passages in Nietzsche's writings that hint at a metaethical position of this kind. But I am not convinced that these passages should be taken completely at face value. It is not obvious to me that Nietzsche was really interested in offering a consistent theory of the metaphysics of value, a worked-out position that might be assigned a precise position on the landscape of metaethical views. His dismissive remarks about objectivity in the realm of value can often be read as polemical invitations to attend to the role of evaluative outlooks within the economy of human drives and purposes. When he writes, for instance, that "nature is always valueless, but has been given value at some time"³³, he is, strictly speaking, saying that there are no mind-independent facts about value; but his aim in saying this is to get us to think about the psychological process of investing things with value.

Furthermore, this interest in the moral psychology of value is in the service of a more comprehensive critique of modern morality, and it is hard to reconcile these critical purposes of Nietzsche's with a

literal anti-realism about reasons and values. At least part of his critique of modern morality focuses on its deleterious consequences for the emergence and development of genuinely higher types of humanity, people who can inspire confidence in the species, and counteract thereby the tendency to nihilism in contemporary culture. This critical argument becomes completely banal, however, if we attribute to Nietzsche himself an anti-realist conception of the evaluative and normative domains. According to this kind of metaethical position, there is nothing that is genuinely and independently valuable, or worthy of choice, admiration, and pursuit; there are merely the preferences and desires that different people happen to have at different times and for different things. We might be able to say that contemporary morality is bad for the higher specimens of humanity, insofar as it is deleterious to their interests and their flourishing. But we cannot say either that these "higher" types really are superior examples of human nature in themselves, or that it is an objectively good thing that they should come into being and flourish. Nietzsche himself simply happens to admire the kinds of people he refers to as higher types, and so his criticism of modern morality comes down to the charge that it frustrates the satisfaction of his own preferences concerning the development of the species (preferences that he presumably hopes his readers will share).³⁴ If this is what his critique amounts to, however, then an appropriate response would be, "So what?" Why should anyone care whether modernity is hospitable to the contingent preferences and desires of Nietzsche and his targeted readers (as opposed, say, to the preferences of the masses)? The whole critical animus of his account seems to make sense only if we take the distinction between higher and lower types objectively, as marking a genuine distinction of rank in regard to the development of human

nature and potential, and only if we take it to be an objectively good thing that genuinely higher natures should be able to come into existence and flourish.³⁵

For these reasons, I think it is difficult to attribute to Nietzsche himself a straightforwardly anti-realist conception of (non-prudential) value and reasons for action. How exactly his critique of modern morality can be reconciled with his occasional anti-realist pronouncements is a problem, to which I do not have a worked out solution (beyond suggesting that these pronouncements can be read as polemical invitations to think about value as a psychological phenomenon). Leaving aside the issue of Nietzsche's own metaethical views, however, it seems plain that Nietzsche does not think that people in general hold an anti-realist conception of the good. His own account of our evaluative practice and our emotional experience suggests that we take values to be objective in the way that anti-realism denies, so that if he is an anti-realist about this domain, his view will amount to a kind of error theory. This can be seen very clearly by reflecting on his account of the slave revolt, as I have reconstructed it in this paper.

Consider the role of values in relation to the ressentiment of the slavish masses. I have characterized this relation as one of expression, and the language of expression might seem to comport well with a noncognitivist interpretation of evaluative discourse. But the details of the expressive account I have developed in fact preclude such an interpretation. Ressentiment finds expression in the slave revolt through the postulated need for vindicatory self-understanding. The adoption of a new table of values satisfies this need, however, only on the assumption that the new values capture independent facts of the matter about genuine distinctions of merit. The emotional

orientation of the slaves is vindicated in the relevant sense when it can be experienced by the slaves as one that is uniquely appropriate to its object, insofar as the object is taken to be evil. The sense of vindication thus operates on the supposition that the values that are affirmed in the revolt are prior to and independent of the emotional stances that they are taken to validate. We might put this by saying that the expressive dynamic at work in the slave revolt requires that the slaves themselves do not understand the values they embrace in expressive terms.

Of course it is possible that people are mistaken to view their values in this objective way. Nietzsche could himself favor an anti-realist position, even while granting that values are generally taken by people to be objective; in that event, as I noted above, his position would have the shape of an error theory. But it is an interesting consequence of this that Nietzsche's account of the creative aspect of ressentiment can to some extent be detached from larger issues in metaethics about the objectivity of value. As long as one is prepared to concede that evaluative discourse carries a claim to objective validity, one will be in a position to take seriously Nietzsche's story about the way in which ressentiment gives rise to new values. This means that even those of us who are not attracted to an anti-realist account of value might be able to take on Nietzsche's central insights about the role of the emotions in relation to evaluative consciousness.

In the contemporary world, those insights seem likely to have their primary relevance not in relation to the universalistic morality of the Enlightenment, but in connection with such phenomena as religious fundamentalism and nationalistic self-assertion. Countless people live today under conditions of structural comparative

deprivation of the kind that gives rise to Nietzschean ressentiment, and the inarticulate hatred that builds up under these conditions makes them easily susceptible to evaluative ideologies of a distinctive sort. These ideologies—conservative fundamentalism in the United States, militant Islamism in the middle east and Asia, revanchist nationalism in parts of the old Soviet empire—may be inimical to the true interests of the people who embrace them. But they nevertheless speak to a need that Nietzsche identified, the need for a vindicatory interpretation of one's own basic emotional situation and experience.³⁶ The contemporary successors to Nietzsche's ascetic priests, it seems to me, are the populist politicians, preachers, and imams of revenge, who exploit the ressentiment of the masses for their own transparently cynical purposes. And Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt can help us to understand the psychic forces that render so many people vulnerable to the ministrations of this new priestly class.³⁷

¹ Parenthetical references in the text will be to sections of Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals; other references to texts by Nietzsche will be given in notes. Quotations from the Genealogy will follow the Kaufmann and Hollingdale translation: Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans., Walter Kaufmann, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989).

² See Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology", as reprinted in his Making Sense of Humanity (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 65-76.

³ See, for instance, my Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Nietzsche flirts with epiphenomenalism at Twilight of the Idols VI.3, e.g., while characterological determinism is evident in GM, Preface, sec. 2 and throughout Ecce Homo.

⁴ For a clear statement of this problem, see Mark Migotti, "Slave Morality, Socrates, and the Bushmen: A Reading of the First Essay of the Genealogy of Morals", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 58 (1998), pp. 745-79. In sec. 2 below I shall offer a different response to the problem from the one Migotti favors.

⁵ Similar questions about the slave revolt are raised by Rüdiger Bittner, "Ressentiment", in Richard Schacht, ed., Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality. Essays on Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morals" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 127-38. Bittner develops his objection in the language of agency, suggesting that it undermines the idea that the slave revolt is the result of a creative act on the part of the slaves (cf. 133-4). I agree with him about this (understanding action to be behavior undertaken through the logic of strategic

rationality), but disagree that it tells against Nietzsche's story (rather than a common interpretation of that story).

⁶ In GM I.10, where the concept is first explicitly introduced, Nietzsche characterizes ressentiment as a reaction against a hostile external world, and he contrasts the "reactive" mode of evaluation to which to ressentiment gives rise with the self-affirmation involved in aristocratic evaluation. Drawing on these passages, Brian Leiter suggests that the "core elements" of ressentiment include "a negative, evaluative reaction to an external state of affairs that is unpleasant but which one cannot address through physical action"; see his Nietzsche on Morality (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 204. But this characterization is at once obscure (what is an "evaluative reaction"?) and underdescribed. Not every negative reaction to an unpleasant and unyielding stimulus counts as ressentiment. To arrive at an illuminating account of the moral psychology of ressentiment, we need to think more systematically about the distinctive features of the emotion and the circumstances in which it emerges, drawing on Nietzsche's texts, but going beyond them to arrive at a fuller picture.

⁷ I take it here that one of the most important desiderata for an account of ressentiment is the fact that Nietzsche associates it paradigmatically with the outlook of the slavish. We should therefore expect that its origin and structure would reflect features that are distinctive of the position of slaves within a culture, and comparative structural deprivation seems highly salient in this connection.

⁸ Compare Bernard Reginster, "Nietzsche On Ressentiment and Valuation", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 57 (1997), pp. 281-305, at p. 286. A more extensive treatment, which also emphasizes the structural conditions that give rise to ressentiment, is Max Scheler, Das

Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), chap. 1. In GM, I.10 Nietzsche entertains tentatively the possibility that noble types might occasionally be subject to feelings of ressentiment, remarking that such feelings will immediately be discharged by the noble person who is subject to them, and so fail to fester and grow. This might appear to be at odds with the suggestion that ressentiment grows out of structural deprivation. But we can imagine that the masters Nietzsche is here thinking of are only selectively deprived of things that they desire (e.g. a given sexual partner or political office), in ways that are compatible with lack of deprivation in many other domains of their life and experience.

⁹ Similar ideas are sometimes vaguely hinted at in the secondary literature. For example, in Nietzsche on Morality, pp. 202-4, Brian Leiter describes the slave revolt as a "projection" of the ressentiment of the slaves. See also Bittner, "Ressentiment", pp. 133-4, who remarks that suffering and ressentiment might give rise to new moral convictions in something like the way a disease gives rise to symptoms. But neither Leiter nor Bittner offer any detail about how exactly the new table of values might be understood as the projection or symptom of an emotion such as ressentiment. It is the burden of my paper to try to work out in clear terms this central Nietzschean idea.

¹⁰ In Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen Scheler also treats the slave revolt as a response to psychic tensions in the self; see, e.g., pp. 32-4. A similar approach is developed by Reginster in "Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation", who emphasizes the tension between the repressed desire for power of the aristocratic priests and their inability to satisfy that desire overtly, a tension that is crystallized in their experience of shame; see, e.g., Reginster,

"Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation", pp. 286-7, 296-7. But Scheler and Reginster give an account very different from mine of how tension is released through the slave revolt, one that remains wedded to the structures of instrumental rationality, and that ultimately treats the new values as pieces of false consciousness.

¹¹ To the extent the internalization of new values relieves the anxiety and discomfort of the slavish masses, it might be described as a means to that end. It does not follow from this, however, that the expressive processes I have postulated operate through the logic of instrumental rationality. A process implicates this form of rationality when its operation requires the agent to conceptualize their actions in terms of the relation between means and ends (either consciously or unconsciously). The expressive processes I have described, however, do not require the agent to think about them in this way. The slaves adopt new values because doing so helps them to make sense of their emotional experience, thereby relieving a condition of psychic distress; but they do not need to be aware, at any level, that the adoption of new values will bring about this effect. (I am indebted to Herlinde Pauer-Studer for pressing me to be clearer about this point.)

¹² The slave revolt does, then, eventually inflict harm on the masters, as the strategic interpretation maintains, insofar as it undermines their cultural authority. But the expressive interpretation supplies the mechanism whereby this kind of harm is gradually inflicted, a mechanism that is missing when the revolt is thought of exclusively in terms of strategic rationality. This mechanism operates without our needing to suppose that the masses deliberately aim to inflict harm on the masters through their adoption of the new value scheme.

¹³ Nietzsche clearly assumes that modern European culture has a leveling and egalitarian tendency that is inimical to the development of higher specimens of humanity; see GM, I.12, on "the diminution and leveling of man" (p. 44), also the "Anmerkung" at the end of the first essay of the Genealogy, with its discussion of the effects of an evaluative scheme on "producing a stronger type" of human being (p. 56). It is not perhaps entirely clear why the democratizing values of modernity should have had this effect; one could imagine that a hereditary aristocracy would lead the rulers over time to become decadent and effete, while a culture that gives opportunities to everyone might tend to encourage genuine innovation and continual renewal (in spiritual and intellectual domains, at any rate, if not necessarily on the battlefield).

¹⁴ See for instance GM, III.14, where the masses are described as having "poison[ed] the consciences of the fortunate with their misery" (p. 124), making them ashamed of their good fortune; also GM, I.16, where it is said to be the decisive mark of the higher natures in contemporary culture to be "divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values" (p. 52).

¹⁵ For a persuasive and comprehensive treatment of this important theme in Nietzsche's philosophy, see Bernard Reginster, The Affirmation of Life. Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Contrast Reginster, "Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation". Reginster takes the psyche of the priests to be the primary site at which the slave revolt takes place, and he supposes that it leads the priests to be deeply self-deceived about the nature of their own real values; see pp. 289, 291, 297. By contrast, I take the priests to be initiators and facilitators of a process that takes place elsewhere, in

the psyches of the slavish, and to be free from self-deception about their values and aims as they play this role. This interpretation fits better the overt strategic language Nietzsche deploys in talking about the role of the aristocratic priests.

¹⁷ To the extent the aristocratic priests are engaged in this strategy of premeditated revenge, their activities can straightforwardly be characterized as a revolt, insofar as they are aimed at undermining the power of the masters. Thus the multifarious processes in which the revolt consists will involve both overt and covert political meanings.

¹⁸ Contrast Bittner, "Ressentiment", pp. 132-3. Bittner suggests that this kind of fantasizing can provide psychic gratification only if the agent is (temporarily) unaware that they are fantasizing. But this seems to me to be untrue to experience, perhaps underestimating the extent to which infantile patterns of mental activity leave traces in adult life.

¹⁹ A person can be evil and still, by all outward measures, flourishing.

²⁰ This way of understanding Nietzsche's talk about imaginary revenge would entail that elements of strategic thinking infect the outlook of the slavish masses themselves (at least at the level of fantasy), not merely that of the priestly aristocracy. It would not follow, however, that the expressive interpretation would thereby have been supplanted. On the contrary, the mechanism whereby the fantasized revenge is enacted precisely presupposes the susceptibility of the masses to the expressive processes I have described.

²¹ Reginster, in "Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation", takes the opposite response the paradox from the one I would favor. He affirms that noble-valuation is built into the experience of ressentiment, and denies that the new values are genuinely accepted by the priests in

whom the slave revolt takes place, who are said to be deceived about what they really value (see e.g. pp. 296-7). By contrast, I deny that ressentiment really presupposes the acceptance of the aristocratic values repudiated in the slave revolt.

²² See Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments, chap. 2. The distinctions between Nietzschean ressentiment and moralized resentment appear to be overlooked in Robert C. Solomon, "One Hundred Years of Ressentiment: Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals", in Schacht, ed., Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality, pp. 95-126, esp. pp. 103, 115-8.

²³ A different possibility is that those in the grip of ressentiment view the powerful as possessing things of value, without necessarily being good or admirable themselves (for instance, in the dimension of ethical assessment of character). This kind of evaluative framework would seem compatible with, and so leave room for, the extreme negative assessment of the masters that is involved in the new table of values to which ressentiment eventually gives rise. I doubt, however, that tensions within the evaluative outlook of the slaves would entirely be eliminated by this way of understanding ressentiment. In terms of the new table of values, among the things that make the powerful evil are precisely their possession of traits and qualities that the weak presumably covet themselves (including, above all, power and strength); cf. GM, I.7, also the parable of the lambs and the birds of prey in GM, I.13. So if ressentiment involves essentially a positive evaluation of those traits and qualities, it will be at odds with the new forms of assessment to which it itself is supposed to give rise.

²⁴ See my "Addiction as Defect of the Will. Some Philosophical Reflections", as reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., Free Will (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 424-52. See also T. M. Scanlon,

What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), chap. 1.

²⁵ These processes are unhealthy, I take it, for the masses who accept the ideology of ascetic morality, increasing their suffering and inhibiting in them the very instincts necessary to sustain life itself. To characterize modern morality in these terms, as a form of psychic pathology, is of course not to say that the masses could realistically do any better.

²⁶ See also Thus Spoke Zarathustra, I.15, and The Gay Science, sec. 1.

²⁷ Here it is perhaps misleading to speak of self-vindication, insofar as ascetic morality precisely serves to characterize the person who accepts it as pervasively sinful. This moral outlook nevertheless provides a value-laden vindication of some aspect of the situation of the self in the world, in this case the experience of suffering. It is in this broader sense that the notion of "self-vindication" should be construed.

²⁸ Nietzsche's account of ascetic ideals in the third essay of the Genealogy exhibits this same kind of complexity. There the need that is gratified in ascetic morality, namely the need to inflict harm, serves only to increase the suffering of the agent to which that need itself originally was a response.

²⁹ This is presumably part of what keeps the psychic forces of ressentiment and hatred beneath the radar of consciousness.

³⁰ See Beyond Good and Evil, sec. 260. Nietzsche here (and also in sec. 261) contrasts the active mode of valuation of the masters with the passive or receptive mode that is characteristic of the slaves, a contrast that might appear to suggest that the slavish mode of valuing things is heteronymous, and entirely indifferent to any need for self-

vindication. But the later sections of the third essay of the Genealogy make clear that the will for meaning is equally at work in the valuations of the masses in modern culture, however passive or perverted those valuations might be in other respects.

³¹ See Leiter, Nietzsche on Morality, pp. 146-55.

³² Raymond Geuss, "Nietzsche and Morality", p. 191. Geuss goes on to suggest that the flux of admiration and disgust "gives rise to a wide variety of different 'oughts'" (p. 191). But the acknowledgement of local and contingent "Verbindlichkeiten" of this kind is actually at tension with the metaethical picture that Geuss ascribes to Nietzsche. Either there is, in the "final analysis", just a flow of attitudes such as admiration and disgust, or there is in addition to such natural psychological facts a set of distinctively normative or evaluative claims about what variously-situated individuals have reason to do. The fact that "Verbindlichkeiten" are local and contingent rather than universal does not make them part of the natural flux of human attitudes and reactions. (The difference here is that between an anti-realist position that holds that there are no true claims about what anyone has reason to do, and an "internalist" position that allows for such truths, but holds that reasons are conditioned by the desires and attitudes of the agent who has them.)

³³ The Gay Science, sec. 301.

³⁴ Leiter pretty much embraces an interpretation of Nietzsche's critical project in just these terms, in Nietzsche on Morality, pp. 149-50. He recognizes that this reading may not seem to comport with Nietzsche's unqualified critical conclusions, but dismisses this tendency in Nietzsche as rhetorical excess; see Nietzsche on Morality, pp. 153-5.

³⁵ Against this, it might be said that it overlooks the distinction between metaethical reflection about moral discourse and its metaphysical commitments, and the first-order "moralizing" that goes on when we deploy moral discourse in practice. Nietzsche's critical animadversions on modern morality serve to express his strong attitudes about the development of the human species, and there is nothing in an anti-realist view that would preclude such moralizing discourse from being as vigorous as one might please. (Compare Simon Blackburn, Ruling Passions [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]—though Blackburn is a "quasi-realist", not an unvarnished anti-realist about morality.) But I think the question remains as to why the rest of us should take Nietzsche's vigorous moralizing seriously, if it really functions as the anti-realist presumes. Furthermore, Nietzsche himself does not distinguish hermetically between first-order moralizing and metaethical reflection. His apparently anti-objectivist pronouncements are sprinkled throughout the works in which he is conducting his critical examination of the value of moral values, and this makes it seem very artificial to ignore them for purposes of thinking about that critical project. Given the integral relation of those pronouncements to Nietzsche's critical project, we cannot take them as straightforward statements of an anti-realist metaethical view, for the integration of such statements into his polemic would seem at cross-purposes to his critical intentions.

³⁶ The expressive function of these contemporary ideologies is, in fact, more obvious than is the case with the more generalized morality of modernity that Nietzsche was considering. Hatred is closer to the surface in these ideologies, and they do not shrink from calling explicitly for revenge against those who are condemned as evil

infidels, historical enemies of our people, liberal elitists, etc. This makes them less interesting from a psychological point of view—less complex, paradoxical, self-undermining, and so on—but perhaps even more dangerous.

³⁷ I received much stimulating feedback on earlier versions of this paper from audiences at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the University of Vienna, and the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. Brian Leiter provided helpful comments on the penultimate draft. I owe a special debt to Bernard Reginster for extensive and constructive suggestions about an early version of the paper, and in general for many stimulating discussions over the years about Nietzsche's moral psychology. Work on this project was conducted with the generous support of a Research Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.