

NIETZSCHE AND GENEALOGY

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In 1971 Michel Foucault published an essay on Nietzsche's conception of 'genealogy'¹ and later began to use the term 'genealogy' to describe some of his own work.² Foucault's writings have been remarkably influential and so it wouldn't be at all odd for someone familiar with recent developments in history and the social sciences to come to think that Nietzsche had invented a new approach to these subjects called 'genealogy', an approach then further elaborated in the work of the late Foucault. It turns out, however, to be very difficult to say exactly what this new 'genealogical' form of inquiry is and how it is distinct from other approaches (if it is). A good way to go about trying to get clarity on this issue is, I think, to look with some care at Nietzsche's original discussion of 'genealogy'.

I

Giving a 'genealogy' is for Nietzsche the exact reverse of what we might call 'tracing a pedigree'. The practice of tracing pedigrees is at least as old as the oldest Western literature. Thus Book II of the *Iliad* gives a pedigree of Agamemnon's sceptre:

Powerful Agamemnon
stood up holding the sceptre Hephaistos had wrought him carefully.
Hephaistos gave it to Zeus the king, son of Kronos,
and Zeus in turn gave it to the courier Argeiphontes,
and lord Hermes gave it to Pelops, driver of horses,

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¹ M. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire', in his *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971).

² M. Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

and Pelops gave it to Atreus, the shepherd of the people.
Atreus dying left it to Thyestes of the rich flocks,
and Thyestes left it in turn to Agamemnon to carry
and to be lord over many islands and over all Argos.
Leaning upon this sceptre he spoke . . .³

This early example exhibits the main features of what I will call a 'pedigree'. The general context is one of legitimizing or at any rate of positively valorizing some (usually contemporary) person, institution, or thing. That he has inherited such an ancestral sceptre gives Agamemnon's words an extra weight and constitutes a kind of warrant to be lord over 'Argos' and 'many islands'. The authority this sceptre gives Agamemnon—to speak anachronistically, the Greeks having notoriously had no word for 'authority'—is generally accepted by the other figures who appear in the *Iliad*. In fact that is in some sense the whole problem because, as Diomedes acidly remarks at the beginning of Book IX, although Zeus did give Agamemnon the sceptre 'he did not give you a heart, and of all power this is the greatest' (IX. 39). The only two instances we are given of explicit resistance to this authority are Achilles and Thersites. Odysseus makes a characteristically utilitarian use of Agamemnon's sceptre to beat Thersites into submission (II. 265 ff.),⁴ but Achilles is not amenable either to the pedigree or the physical weight of the sceptre.⁵

The pedigree of the sceptre traces Agamemnon's possession of it back through a series of unbroken steps of transmission to a singular origin. For the pedigree actually to discharge its function the origin to which it recurs must be an actual source of positive value, and each of the steps in the succession must be value-preserving. So in the case of this particular pedigree it is important that one can trace the ownership of the sceptre back to Hephaistos and Zeus, the former presumably guaranteeing the quality of the workmanship, the latter the associated claim to political authority, and it is

³ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), book II, lines 100 ff.

⁴ Note that Lattimore translates the same Greek word ('skēptron') sometimes as 'sceptre' but often as 'staff' (e.g. Homer, *Iliad*, book I, line 14; book I, line 28; book II, line 199).

⁵ The treatment of Thersites in the *Iliad* is a good instance of what Nietzsche claims was a central characteristic of an aristocratic society. Thersites' criticisms of Agamemnon are virtually the same as those voiced by Achilles (cf. *Iliad*, book II, lines 225 ff. with book I, lines 149 ff.), but whereas the Greeks (including Agamemnon) are quickly wooing Achilles with gifts and apologies, Thersites is only beaten and laughed at (*Iliad*, book II, lines 265-77). This does seem to be a society in which the content of what is said is less important than who it is who says it.

equally important that each step in the transmission is a voluntary donation.⁶

This kind of pedigree, then, has five main characteristics:

1. In the interests of a positive valorization of some item
2. the pedigree, starting from a singular origin
3. which is an actual source of that value
4. traces an unbroken line of succession from the origin to that item
5. by a series of steps that preserve whatever value is in question.

One might think that this way of thinking (and especially characteristic 5) overlooks an important feature of pedigrees, namely that in certain cases the longer the pedigree—the further back it can be traced—the better, the greater the resultant valorization. A family that could trace its patent of nobility back to the 15th century might think that this pedigree showed it to be more noble than a family whose patent went back only to the 19th century. Two distinct thoughts run together in this. First, that what is older is better, i.e. a more genuine or more intense source of value, so that getting into contact with it is inherently desirable and it is just an accident that getting in touch with this source of value requires a large number of steps of succession. The second thought is that the increasing number of steps—the passage of time itself—enhances the prestige or value of the item in question: It isn't that the older is necessarily a better *source* of value than what is more recent, but the value increases through succession. This suggests that one should perhaps revise 5 to read:

- 5*. by a series of steps that preserve or enhance whatever value is in question.

⁶ In book 1 Achilles has already given a very different account of the sceptre he holds while speaking in the assembly. (Unfortunately it isn't clear whether or not this is the same one Hephaistos gave Zeus, who gave Argeiphontes . . .)

By this sceptre which never again will bear leaf nor
branch, now that it has left behind the cut stump in the mountains,
nor shall it ever blossom again, since the bronze blade stripped
bark and leafage, and now at last the sons of the Achaians
carry it in their hand in state when they administer
the justice of Zeus.

(Homer. *Iliad*, book 1, lines 234 ff.)

To say that Hephaistos 'wrought' the sceptre for Zeus presumably means that he made and inserted the gold studs or nails with which the wooden body of the sceptre was adorned—after all, Hephaistos was essentially a smith (*Iliad*, book xviii, lines 368 ff.) not a carpenter. So Hephaistos' making of the sceptre for Zeus is perhaps not the natural origin or stopping point it may seem to be. The wood for the body of a sceptre must have come from somewhere, so perhaps there is a step in the succession before the fitting of the golden studs. The administration of the justice of Zeus requires someone to go out into the mountains to cut down an appropriate branch and strip off the bark and leafage. Cutting things down with the bronze blade, however, is just what Achilles is good at.

'Genealogy' as practiced by Nietzsche differs from the tracing of a pedigree in all five respects. 'Genealogy' is certainly not undertaken with the intention of legitimizing any present person, practice, or institution, and won't in general have the effect of enhancing the standing of any contemporary item. As far as points 2 and 3 are concerned, genealogy doesn't characteristically discover a single origin for the object of its investigation. To take the example Nietzsche himself analyzes in greatest detail, Christian morality does not go back to a single instituting activity by a particular person or small group in ancient Palestine. The whole point of *Genealogy of Morality* is that Christian morality results from a conjunction of a number of *diverse* lines of development: the *ressentiment* of slaves directed against their masters (GM I. 1–10), a psychological connection between 'having debts' and 'suffering pain' that gets established in archaic commercial transactions (GM II. 4–6), a need people come to have to turn their aggression against themselves which results from urbanization (GM II. 16), a certain desire on the part of a priestly caste to exercise dominion over others (GM III. 16) etc.⁷ The genealogy reveals Christian morality to arise from the historically contingent conjunction of a large number of such *separate* series of processes that ramify the further back one goes and present no obvious or natural single stopping place that could be designated 'the origin'.⁸

Furthermore, the further back the genealogy reaches the less likely it is to locate anything that has unequivocal, inherent 'positive' value which it could transmit 'down' the genealogical line to the present.⁹ When Nietzsche writes that our world of moral concepts has an origin (*Anfang*) which 'like the origin (*Anfang*) of everything great on earth, was for a long time and thoroughly doused in blood' (GM II. 6) he is opposing the sentimental assumption that things we now value (for whatever reason) *must* have had an origin of which we would also approve.¹⁰ Nietzsche thinks that this unquestioned assumption has tacitly guided much historiography and constitutes both an obstacle to understanding and a symptom of debility. Nietzsche, of course, is not committed to the 'world of moral concepts' that

⁷ [Editor's note.] For abbreviations used in referring to Nietzsche's works, see Note on References above.

⁸ In tracing a pedigree one is positioned, as it were, at the singular point of 'origin' and invited to look 'down' the chain of succession (from Hephaistos to Agamemnon), whereas in a genealogy one stands with Ego and looks back 'up' the lines of transmission at the seemingly unlimited and ramifying series of ancestors.

⁹ At D 44 Nietzsche asserts that the closer we get to the 'origin' (*Ursprung*) of things, the less possible it is for us to evaluate what we find; our forms of evaluation simply become increasingly irrelevant. The realm of origins is the realm of radical insignificance, not of heightened meaningfulness. Oddly enough, Habermas (*Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 356) cites and discusses this very passage, but seems not to have recognized its implications.

¹⁰ Cf. BGE 257.

comprises 'duty', 'guilt', 'conscience' and such things anyway, and that this world had its origins in blood and cruelty is no argument against it for him (although it might be an argument against it for those who hold the sentimental view mentioned above). Equally the violent and bloody origins of Christian morality is for Nietzsche no argument *in favour* of it.¹¹

Value-preserving (or value-enhancing) transmission is perhaps a slightly more complex phenomenon than the origination of value because very different kinds of transfer might be recognized: Agamemnon's sceptre could be legitimately passed on by donation *inter vivos* or testament. However 'value-preserving transmission' is understood in a given pedigree, Nietzsche seems to go out of his way to emphasize that the history delineated in a genealogy won't generally exhibit unbroken lines of value-preserving succession, but will rather be characterized by an overwhelming contingency, and dominated by violent forms of human action based on pervasive delusions. Thus the origin of 'bad conscience' was 'not a gradual, not a voluntary transformation' nor was it 'an organic growing-over-into new conditions' but rather was 'a break, a leap, a coercion' (GM II. 17). It seems reasonable, then, to assume that a genealogy won't exhibit characteristics 4 and 5 of a pedigree.

II

I lay such great stress on the difference between tracing a pedigree and giving a genealogy because the difference seems to me often overlooked with the result that Nietzsche comes to be seen as a conscious archaizer like Ludwig Klages or Heidegger. Thus Habermas misses the distinction and ends up attributing to Nietzsche just about the exact reverse of the position he actually holds:

Nietzsche has recourse to . . . the myth of origins . . . : the *older* is that which is *earlier* in the chain of generations, that which is nearer to the origin (*Ursprung*). The *more aboriginal* (*das Ursprünglichere*) has standing as that which ought to be more revered, that which is nobler, less corrupt, purer, in short: better. Descent (*Abstammung*) and origin (*Herkunft*) serve as the criterion of rank in both a social and a logical sense.¹²

¹¹ One might wonder whether D 44 (our forms of valuation can get less and less purchase the further back toward the 'origins' we move) is compatible with GM II. 6 (the beginnings of everything great are doused in blood). This difficulty disappears if one keeps in mind that for Nietzsche there are no absolute 'origins' or 'beginnings'; an 'origin' is a relative stopping point picked out for one or another reason, but 'behind' which there will stand a history (which one could investigate if one had some reason to do so). It is perfectly coherent to think that the period of the recent past (from three thousand to, say, five hundred years ago) was an especially nasty patch and one of particular importance for understanding how various contemporary phenomena have come to be the way they are, but also that the further back one goes the more difficult it becomes to apply our forms of valuation.

¹² J. Habermas, 'Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung', in K.-H. Bohrer (eds.), *Mythos und Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 425.

Habermas is right to emphasize the importance of 'rank' and 'rank-ordering' in Nietzsche. Nietzsche is a conscious radical anti-egalitarian not just in politics¹³ but also in ethics. He explicitly rejects the view that there should be one morality for everyone (BGE 198, 43, 30). In fact he even holds that it is '*immoral*' to apply the principle 'What is fair for one person, is fair for another' (BGE 221). Morality is to be subordinated to the principle of rank-ordering (BGE 221, 219, 228, 257). Habermas is wrong, however, to connect this line of argument with a purported greater nobility of that which is older or more aboriginal.

Habermas also attributes to Nietzsche a 'pragmatist theory of cognition' and a view of truth which 'reduces' it to preference.¹⁴ I'm skeptical of this attribution; there is at any rate a clear and strong strand in Nietzsche's published works that explicitly contrasts 'what is true' and what anyone might prefer, desire or find useful. I would like now to consider some passages that exhibit this strand:

At GS 344 Nietzsche is discussing the belief he thinks constitutive of 'science', namely that truth is more important than anything else. This belief could not have arisen from a 'calculation of usefulness' because 'truth *and* untruth both continuously show themselves to be useful'.¹⁵ If that is the case, 'usefulness' can't be the criterion by which truth is distinguished from untruth, and it becomes difficult to see how this passage would be compatible with a pragmatist theory of truth or cognition.

At BGE 39 Nietzsche claims that something might be true even though it is 'in the highest degree harmful and dangerous'; it might be a basic property of existence that full cognition of it would be fatal. I assume that the 'truth' at issue here is the metaphysical truth that human existence is at best an insignificant tissue of senseless suffering. We might not be inclined to think of this as an archetypical 'truth', but Nietzsche was.¹⁶ Here, too, it is hard to see how one could reduce this 'truth' to any kind of preference.

At BGE 120 Nietzsche speaks of the 'philosophers of the future' (with, it

¹³ Cf. GS 377; BGE 30, 40, 202-3, 242, 44; A 57.

¹⁴ Habermas, 'Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung', 421 ff.

¹⁵ The passage actually reads: 'Whence might science then have taken its unconditional belief, its conviction, on which it rests, that truth is more important than any other thing, even than any other conviction. Precisely this conviction [i.e. that truth is more important than anything else, R.G.] could not have arisen if truth *and* untruth both had shown themselves continuously as useful, as is the case.'

¹⁶ Nietzsche was clearly fascinated by this Romantic view that the truth about human life is literally unbearable to most humans—one finds it already in BT 3. One of the traditional functions of art for Nietzsche is to produce 'worlds of appearance' (*Schein*) which will hide the horrid truth from us and allow us to survive (cf. BT 7). The 'ascetic priest' in the third essay of GM is not only a physician and shepherd (III. 15) but also an 'artist' in feelings of guilt (III. 15): By creating an illusory 'sense' for human suffering ('You are suffering *because* you are guilty'; cf. III. 15-20) the priest seduces humans into continuing to live (III. 13).

seems to me, evident approval) and reports that they will smile if anyone says to them: 'That thought exalts me; how could it not be true?' They won't be inclined to believe that truth will be pleasing to them.

At GM I. 1 Nietzsche 'wishes' that the English psychologists who are his main opponents might be generous-spirited, courageous, and proud animals who have trained themselves 'to sacrifice all that they wish were the case to the truth'.

No one of these examples is perhaps decisive but the cumulative effect is, I think, to make one suspicious of attributing to Nietzsche any very straightforward kind of pragmatist theory of truth or any view that directly reduces truth to mere preference. This suspicion should be reinforced by a careful reading of GM III. 24–5, where Nietzsche presents it as one of his main philosophical achievements to have called into question the value of truth (and of the will-to-truth).¹⁷ For a pragmatist there isn't really much point in 'calling into question' the value of truth. The value of truth is obvious; after all, for the pragmatist we just *mean* by 'truth' what works, and how could that *not* have value for us?¹⁸ Similarly if truth is just a matter of preference, the will-to-truth is unproblematic and doesn't need, one would think, any special 'justification': If 'the truth' can turn out to be something *contrary* to what I would prefer to believe, then I might ask why I should nevertheless pursue it (have a 'will-to' it) but surely I don't need some special justification to have a will-to-'what-I-prefer'. The kind of detailed and often subtle accounts Nietzsche gives of the various different ways truth (and untruth) have (or lack) values of different kinds, are pleasing to us (or not), conform to what we would wish or prefer to be the case (or not), make most sense if one assumes that Nietzsche takes truth, preference and value to be *prima facie* distinct things and does not have a philosophically reductive account which would settle the matter from the start on general grounds and make detailed investigation otiose.

From the fact that Nietzsche does not seek to 'reduce' (in the sense in which philosophers use that term) truth to preference, utility, taste etc. it does not, of course, follow that it is not of great importance to investigate the multiple way in which claims to truth are connected with various value-judgments.

Nietzsche does wish to criticize the correspondence theory of truth and the unquestioned belief in the absolute value of truth, but he does not try to

¹⁷ Cf. also BGE I.

¹⁸ There is another version of 'pragmatism' to be found, for example in the works of Richard Rorty (cf. Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)) which seeks not to 'define' but dispense with a philosophical definition of truth. I adopt the view in the main text because I believe it closer to what those who attribute to Nietzsche a 'pragmatist' conception of truth (e.g. Habermas) would mean by 'pragmatism'.

substitute his own 'theory' of truth for the correspondence-theory. If one takes a basically Platonist view (to the effect that one must begin by asking and answering the question: 'What is . . . (truth)?') it will seem that there is a huge gap or blank at what ought to be the centre of Nietzsche's philosophy, and one will be strongly tempted to fill in the blank: If Nietzsche clearly attacks the correspondence view, shows no interest in coherence, and seems to present no clear alternative of his own invention, then he must tacitly hold some kind of reductivist or pragmatist view. The most fruitful way of taking Nietzsche seems to me to see him not as trying to propound his own variant theory of truth, but as formulating a new question 'How and why does the will-to-truth come about?' (and claiming that this question is more interesting than, and doesn't presuppose an antecedent answer to Plato's question 'What is truth?').

Finally it is in some sense correct, as Habermas claims, that Nietzsche wishes to 'enthroned *taste* . . . as the only organ of a "cognition" beyond true and false, good and evil'.¹⁹ However if, as I have suggested above, the elevation of the faculty of taste is not associated with a 'reduction' of truth claims to mere claims of subjective preference, there is no reason to believe that this increased standing for taste need imply, as Habermas thinks it does, that 'contradiction and critique lose their sense'.²⁰ Taste may in fact be held to be more important than truth and yet it not be the case that I can reject certain statements *as untrue because* they don't appeal to me.

III

Having cleared away some of the debris blocking access to Nietzsche's texts, we can turn our attention to what he says about 'genealogy'.

Much of Nietzsche's later work is devoted to trying to give a 'genealogy' of Christianity and its associated ascetic morality, and so this genealogy of Christianity seems a reasonable place to start.

Like many other religions, 'Christianity' has a bi-partite structure: a set of antecedently existing practices, modes of behaviour, perception, and feeling which at a certain time are given an interpretation which imposes on them a meaning they did not have before²¹ (GS 353). Thus in the specific case of Christianity Nietzsche distinguishes: a) a way of life or 'practice' which is

¹⁹ Habermas, 'Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung', 422.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 424.

²¹ Nietzsche seems to use 'meaning' (*Bedeutung*) and 'sense' (*Sinn*) more or less interchangeably, at least in the contexts that are relevant for the discussion of 'genealogy', and so I won't try to distinguish them.

specifically associated with Jesus because he is thought to have instantiated it to a particularly high degree and in a particularly striking way, but which is in principle livable almost anywhere and at any time (A 39, WP 212)—a form of life, i.e. of instinctive practice, *not* a form of belief, which consists in the unconditional forgiveness of enemies, failure to resist evil, abstention from use of force or the moral condemnation of others, etc. (A 33, 35, 39, WP 158–63, 211–12)—from b) a particular interpretation put on that way of life (as instantiated by Jesus), i.e. a set of propositions that eventually become the content of Christian belief/faith. This interpretation is more or less ‘invented’ by Paul (A 42) and contains various dogmatic propositions about the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, human sinfulness and need for redemption etc. (A 39–43, WP 167–71, 175, 213). Paul did succeed in getting his reading of the ‘meaning’ of Jesus’ life accepted but his dogmas did not fit very comfortably with the original form of practice Jesus instantiated. To be more exact, Paul’s ‘interpretation’ represents so drastic and crude a misinterpretation of Jesus’ way of life that even at a distance of 2000 years we can see that wherever the Pauline reading gets the upper hand—and it has in general *had* the upper hand for most of the period in question—it transforms ‘Christianity’ (as we can now call the amalgam of Jesus’ form of life and Paul’s interpretation of it) into what is the exact reverse of anything Jesus himself would have practiced. An essentially apolitical, pacifist, non-moralizing form of existence (cf. WP 207) is transformed into a ‘Church’, a hierarchically organized public institution, ‘just the thing Jesus preached against’ (WP 168; cf. WP 213).

Paul’s interpretation of Jesus’ life (which forms the core of what will eventually become ‘Christian theology’) is wrong in two ways. First of all it is a misunderstanding of Jesus way of life. For Paul Jesus’ life and death essentially has to do with sin, guilt and redemption, but the message of Jesus life really is that there *is* no ‘sin’ (A 33), that the very concept of ‘guilt’ is ‘abolished’ (A 41). Second, Paul’s propositional beliefs, taken by themselves (and not as a purported ‘interpretation’ of the meaning of Jesus’ practice) are false. For Nietzsche the whole notion of ‘sin’ is in its origin a priestly misinterpretation of certain physiological states of debility and suffering (GM III. 16–17, III. 20) and the concept ‘guilt’ in the full-blown Christian sense depends on the false assumption that humans have freedom of the will and can thus decide to exercise or refrain from exercising the various powers they have (GM I. 13, D 112, BGE 18, 21, GM III. 15, 20).

Paul’s hijacking of the form of life embodied by Jesus is one episode in what Nietzsche calls the ‘genuine history’ of Christianity (A 39), but it shows with particular clarity the bi-partite structure (of ‘form of life’ on the one

hand and ‘interpretation’ on the other) which was mentioned earlier. It is important to see that Paul’s (successful) attempt to take over the Christian form of life by reinterpreting it is only the first of a series of such episodes (WP 214; cf. GM II. 12–13). Each such event can be described as at the same time a new interpretation of Christianity-as-it-exists (at the given time) *and* as an attempt to take over or get mastery of that existing form of Christianity.²² Each historically successive interpretation/*coup de main* gives the existing Christian way of life a new ‘meaning’. Although Nietzsche at one point says that Paul ‘annuls original Christianity’ (*‘das ursprüngliche Christentum’*) (WP 167), this doesn’t mean that Paul wishes to abolish wholesale the practices that constitute this primordial form of Christianity. Rather he wants to impress on them the stamp of a certain meaning, give them a certain direction. Nietzsche thinks that such attempts to take over/reinterpret an existing set of practices or way of life will not in general be so fully successful that *nothing* of the original form of life remains, hence the continuing tension in post-Pauline Christianity between forms of acting, feeling, judging which still somehow eventually derive from aboriginal Christianity and Paul’s theological dogmas. Equally once Paul’s reading of Christian practice has given these practices a certain ‘meaning’ the historically *next* re-interpretation will in turn find the Pauline meanings already embedded in the form of life it confronts and will be unlikely in giving a new interpretation of that form of life to be able to abolish Pauline concepts and interpretations altogether. Historically, then, successive layers of such ‘meanings’ will be, as it were, deposited (GM II. 13). There will be some gradual change in the actual practices and form of life—Pauline Christianity will begin to develop a Church organization which primordial Christianity didn’t have—and a rather more mercurial shift in the dominant ‘interpretation’ given to the practice, but even the dominant interpretation won’t have been able utterly to eradicate the ‘meanings’ that have previously accumulated, i.e. that have been imposed upon ‘Christianity’ by a series of past agencies.

I write ‘agencies’ advisedly because although I have up to now focused on an episode in which a particular individual (Paul) reinterpreted/attempted-to-get-mastery of an existing form of life, it need not be a particular human individual (i.e. a biologically singular animal) who is the agent. According to Nietzsche, one can perfectly well speak of ‘The Church’ trying to get control of, and impose an interpretation on certain ways of living, feeling

²² Obviously I see no reductionist implications in the claim that a certain event, such as, for example, the Protestant Reformation can be seen as at the same time an attempt to get mastery of Christian life and an attempt to reinterpret it.

and acting, such as for instance the various mendicant movements, arose at the end of the medieval period. In fact in this context Nietzsche doesn't speak of 'agencies' as I have, but of 'wills'. Nietzsche uses the 'will' in a very flexible and expansive way to refer both to smaller and larger entities than the will of a biologically individual human being. One can, according to Nietzsche, look at what we would normally call 'my will' as a kind of resultant of the struggle within me of various drives, impulses and desires, and each of these can itself in some sense be called a 'will'. Similarly one can attribute a 'will' to various entities that are larger than me. The University of Cambridge can have a will, so can the UK, the European Union, etc.

The history of Christianity, then, is a history of successive attempts on the part of a variety of different 'wills' to take control of and reinterpret a complex of habits, feelings, ways of perceiving and acting, thereby imposing on this complex a 'meaning'. Although the 'meaning' imposed at any time by a successful will may in some sense be superseded by a later 'meaning' (imposed by a later will), the original meaning will in general not go out of existence altogether but will remain embedded in at least a modified form in the complex we call 'Christianity'. Part of the reason for this is that once a certain will has been able to impose its meaning on Christianity, it acquires a certain power of resistance to any further attempts on the part of other wills to impose their meaning on the Christian complex. Once Pauline theology has penetrated Christian practice, modified it, given it a certain direction and a particular kind of coherence, etc., any non-Pauline will which tries to impose a new interpretation on Christianity (as thus constituted) won't encounter, as it were, just a tabula rasa, but a set of actively structured forces, practices etc. which will be capable of active resistance to attempts to turn them into other directions, impose new functions on them etc. So each episode of 'reinterpretation' will be a struggle between a will impinging from without bent on mastery/imposition-of-a-new-meaning and a complex way of life which will resist at least by inertia and evasion and probably by more active measures.

Christianity at a given point in time will be a 'synthesis' of the various different 'meanings' imposed on it in the past and which have succeeded in remaining embedded in Christian feeling, forms of action and belief, etc. There will be nothing necessary or even particularly coherent about such a 'synthesis': What 'meanings' it will contain and how they will be related to each other will be just the result of history, and this history will be contingent in a number of ways. It will be contingent which wills encounter and try to 'interpret'/master Christianity at what times and under what circumstances, and it will be contingent how much force, energy, and success they

will have in imposing their 'meaning'.²³ The history of Christianity will 'crystallize itself into a kind of unity which is difficult to dissolve, difficult to analyse, and, it must be emphasized, utterly *undefinable*' (GM II. 13).

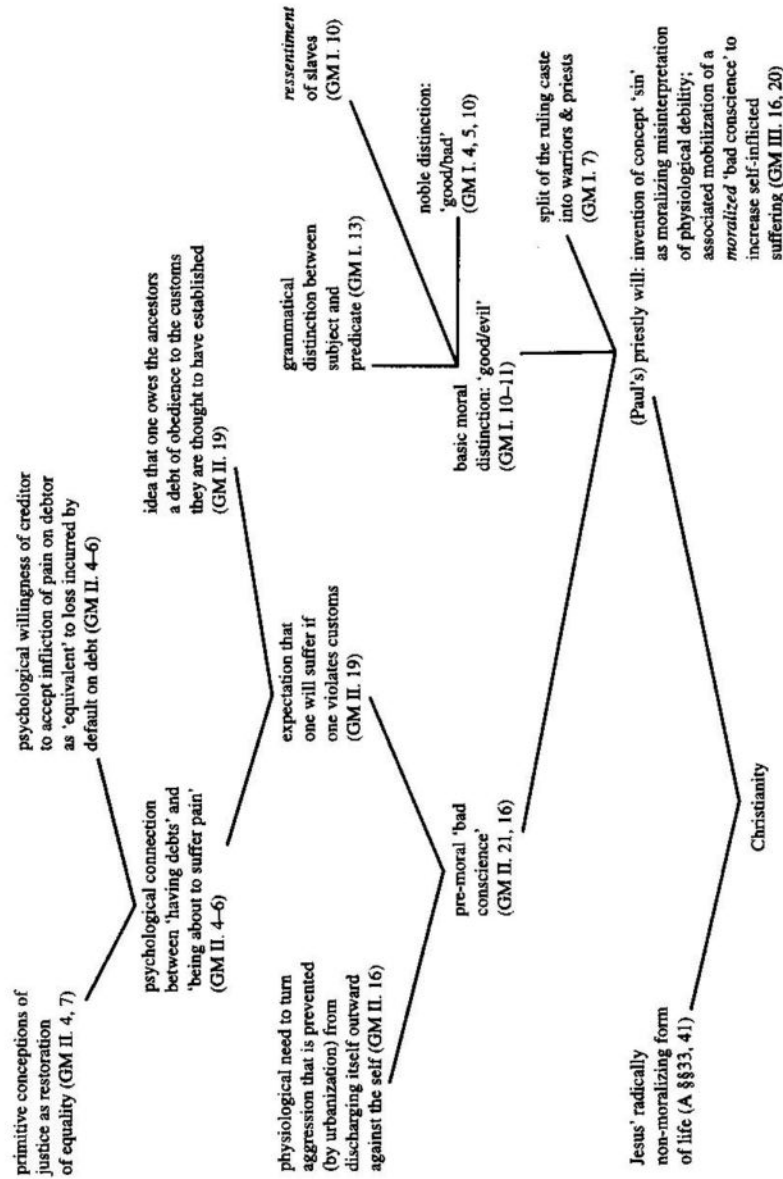
One can't give a 'definition' of Christianity if one means by that an account of a purported essential meaning (or purpose or function) which is invariably characteristic of Christianity. 'Only that which has no history is definable' (GM II. 13) because anything that has a history will partake, like Christianity, in the continuing struggle between wills attempting to impose their meaning or purpose on the item in question, a struggle with constantly shifting outcomes. Instead of a 'definition' one must try to give an 'analysis' of the contingent synthesis of 'meaning' Christianity (for instance) represents. This process of disentangling the separate strands will take the form of a historical account. The reason for this seems to be that 'at an earlier stage that synthesis of "meanings" presents itself in such a way as to be more easily dissolved' (GM II. 13), the individual elements are more distinct.

The appropriate historical account is a genealogy. Starting from the present state of, say, Christianity (or of whatever else is the object of genealogical analysis), the genealogy works its way backward in time, recounting the episodes of struggle between different wills, each trying to impose its interpretation or meaning on the Christianity that existed at its time, and thereby disentangling the separate strands of meaning that have come together in a (contingent) unity in the present. Each such episode is, as it were, the branching node of a genealogical tree (see figure overleaf).

This diagram is intentionally just a sketch of Nietzsche's account, leaving out many details in order to exhibit more clearly the overall structure. At various points the branches simply end (e.g. with the 'grammatical distinction between subject and predicate' on the right toward the top) but those end-points are not absolute origins. The genealogy peters out there either because there is no more information available or because further elaboration of the genealogy at that point would lead too far afield, but in principle if information were available and there were any reason to continue, one could carry on with the genealogy back behind any of the points at which Nietzsche in fact stops.

This is true in particular for the end-point I have designated 'Jesus' radically non-moralizing form of life'. I said at the beginning of this discussion

²³ Nietzsche's view is incompatible with any 'dialectical' conception of history (at least one in the tradition of Hegel). A process can be described as 'dialectical' if it unfolds endogenously according to an inherent logic. For Nietzsche the 'wills' that come to struggle over a form of life characteristically come from *outside* that form and their encounter is contingent in that no outcome of it is more inherently 'logical' than any other. On Nietzsche as anti-dialectician, cf. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).



(p. 329 above) that religions for Nietzsche generally had a bipartite form: a particular way of behaving or living on the one hand and a particular interpretation of that way of living on the other. In this case, there is Jesus' way of life and Paul's interpretation of it, and only both *together* constitute what we call 'Christianity'. One might think that having thus recognized the difference between Jesus and Paul, we could now strip away the Pauline 'interpretation' and we would get back to something that was *not* thus bi-partite, not an interpretation of something, but the way of life itself, a final stopping point, an absolute origin. That one can get back to the thing itself, unvarnished and uninterpreted, is an illusion. Unless one believes in miracles, Jesus' 'practice' itself has historical antecedents which could be genealogically analyzed.²⁴ In addition Jesus' way of life, although it is not constituted by explicit belief in a set of propositions of the kind Paul asserts, can be itself seen as a kind of 'interpretation'. For Nietzsche, I am 'interpreting' a situation by reacting to it in a certain way. If I recoil from it, I am interpreting it as repulsive; if I draw near to it, I am taking it to be attractive; if I pass by without reacting at all, I am treating the situation as irrelevant or insignificant. This, presumably, is one of the things Nietzsche means when he claims that life itself is a process of evaluating and giving preference (BGE 9). So Jesus' form of life itself, although not characterized by explicit theological beliefs of the Pauline kind, will have the same two-part structure: It will ultimately show itself as arising from an episode in which a certain will with a certain interpretation of things tries to take over a preexisting form of living and acting (although the 'interpretation' now won't, as in the later Pauline case, be essentially a question of affirming and believing propositions, but of acting, feeling and perceiving in a certain way). I can't tell you what Nietzsche thinks this antecedently existing mode of living (which Jesus took over and reinterpreted) was, because he doesn't say, but in GM Nietzsche claims that Jesus' 'good news' of universal love was *not* the reverse of 'Jewish hatred' but grew out of it as its crowning moment (GM I. 8). It would be a mistake, I think, to interpret this as meaning that Jesus' love was *not really* love, but rather ('really') hate. It would also be a mistake to identify this transformation of hate into universal love (in the person of Jesus) with what Nietzsche calls 'the slave revolt in morality' (GM I. 7), the transformation of a valuation based on the contrast 'good/bad' into a valuation based on a contrast between 'good' and 'evil'. Paul is a central figure in the slave revolt which lies in the main line of development of modern western morality; Jesus, on the other hand, was, for Nietzsche, only very marginally

²⁴ Although I must admit that there is one passage (A 32) that might conceivably be read as incompatible with the view I present here. Nietzsche says that Jesus' 'good news' is not something he had to acquire by struggle: 'it is there, it is from the beginning . . .'

associated with the genesis of 'our' morality. *Both* arise out of the deepest and most sublime hatred that ever was on earth, but each transforms this hatred in a completely different direction: Paul into a form of guilt-ridden, moralizing asceticism, and Jesus by becoming virtually a 'free spirit' *avant la lettre*, a man incapable of negating or refuting (A 32) with no conception of sin, guilt, or punishment (A 33). When Nietzsche sums up his campaign against traditional morality, the formula he uses is not 'Dionysos against Jesus' but: 'Dionysos against The Crucified' (last sentence of EH), 'The Crucified' being of course, the name of Paul's God (Corinthians 1: 18 ff.)

IV

Alexander Nehamas is doubtless right to claim that for Nietzsche 'genealogy' is not some particular kind of method or special approach, rather it 'simply is history, correctly practiced'.²⁵ So 'Why do genealogy?' means 'Why do history?' Nietzsche has a long early essay on the topic of the value of history which comes to the conclusion that history, like all forms of knowledge, must be put at the service of 'life'; if thus subjected to the demands of 'life' history has genuine, if strictly limited, value. If, on the other hand, history escapes from the 'supervision and surveillance' of 'life' and establishes itself as a scientific discipline pursued for its own sake, it becomes a dangerous cancer which, if unchecked, can sap the vitality of the culture in which it arises.²⁶

In the *Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche says he is trying to answer two questions:

- (1) What is the value of (our) morality? (GM, 'Preface', 3, 5, 6)
- (2) What is the significance of ascetic ideals? (GM III. 1, 2, 5 etc.).

The two questions are connected for Nietzsche because our morality is an ascetic one.

The answer to the first question is that at the moment (our) morality has overwhelmingly negative value as a major hindrance to the enhancement of life. The rest of the full answer to this question, though, is that in the past (and perhaps in some special circumstances in the present, too) traditional morality with its asceticism had the positive value of seducing inherently weak and despairing creatures who would otherwise have been tempted to do away with themselves into continuing to live, by giving their suffering

²⁵ A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 246 n. 1.

²⁶ UM II, 'On the Use and Abuse of History'.

(which actually resulted from their own weakness) an imaginary meaning. Any meaning, though, even a fantastic metaphysical meaning based on lies and gross misapprehensions, is better than none at all (GM III. 13, 20, 28). Thus ascetic morality in the past has been a useful morality for the weak, one that allowed the maximal life-enhancement possible for *them* (given their naturally limited possibilities); it was a trick life itself used to outwit the weak and preserve itself under difficult circumstances when drastic measures were the only ones that would work.²⁷

To understand the second question ('What is the significance of ascetic ideals?') and Nietzsche's answer to it, one must first recall his doctrine of 'significance' (GM II. 12–13). Things don't 'have' significance or meaning; they are *given* it. So the question 'What is the significance of ascetic ideals?' is incomplete; the full version would have to read: 'What is the significance of ascetic ideals for . . .?' where the blank is filled in by some specification of a particular group of people or what I earlier called an 'agency'. In the third part of the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche explicitly discusses this question, filling in the blank in two different ways. First: 'What is the significance of ascetic ideals for artists, philosophers, and others engaged in various creative endeavours?' The answer is that a certain asceticism is part of the natural conditions under which certain forms of creativity flourish—if one wants to paint well, one can't quite be drunk *all* the time, so some minimal forms of self-restraint can be expected to be willed by painters as preconditions of their creativity; that then will be the significance of such ideals for them (GM III. 1–9). The second form of the question is: 'What is the significance of ascetic ideals for religiously serious Christians?' The answer to this is that for Christians ascetic ideals have value in themselves—they aren't just seen as valuable because they are the natural conditions under which something *else* (for instance, creativity) will flourish. To be more exact the Christian wills ascetic ideals in order to undermine life, vitality, and the will itself; the (Christian) ascetic is a 'self-contradiction' (GM III. 13).

There is, of course, a third way to ask the question, namely 'What is the significance of ascetic ideals for Nietzsche?' That is, given Nietzsche's account of the 'meaning' of significance, how does *he* propose to get mastery of these ascetic ideals and impose upon them his own *new* function and meaning?

In one of his unpublished notes (WP 915) Nietzsche writes that he wishes to 'renaturalize asceticism' with the goal of strengthening not negating the

²⁷ The attribution of what seems to be some kind of metaphysical agency to 'life' in passages like GM III. 13 and TI, 'Morality as Counter-Nature', 5 seems to me one of Nietzsche's least inspired and most unfortunate ideas.

will. 'Strengthening the will' and 'enhancing life' seem to be more or less the same thing here, so it seems that Nietzsche's intention is to take over the traditional way of life associated with the ascetic ideal and renaturalize its asceticism in the interests of the enhancement and affirmation of life. In this context it is perhaps relevant to recall that for Nietzsche science and the will-to-truth itself are instances of the 'ascetic ideal' (GM III. 23–7, GS 344). Up to now, Nietzsche thinks, the acquisition of scientific truth has been seen as intrinsically and absolutely valuable, but this demand that we *know* as much of the truth as possible derives from a prior demand that we always *tell* the truth, never deceive others or ourselves, and this is a moral demand. It is presumably an instance of the 'ascetic ideal' because it requires that we tell the truth even when that is contrary to what we would want and what would be good for us (GM I. 1). So Nietzsche's programme of renaturalizing asceticism for the sake of enhancing life would mean, for instance, in the case of science and the pursuit of truth, taking over the various habits, modes of thinking and acting, institutions, etc. associated with science and truth-telling, detaching them from the idea that they represent any value in themselves or have any absolute standing, and transforming them in such a way that they are turned into natural conditions for the enhancement of life (and are seen to be such). The way asceticism was made to contribute concretely to the enhancement of life would then be its 'significance'.

It still isn't clear what role genealogy (or, history) can play in this process. The purpose and effect of a genealogy can't be to criticize values or valuations directly. Nietzsche asserts very clearly that nothing about the history of the emergence or development of a set of valuations could have direct bearing on its value (GS 345, WP 254)—neither can history 'support' or 'legitimize' such value-claims (as tracing a pedigree presupposes), nor can any historical account in any way undermine a form of valuation. A form of valuation has the value it has—that is, for Nietzsche, it makes the contribution it can make to enhancing or negating life—and its origin or history is a separate issue. To be sure, a genealogy *can* undermine various *beliefs* about the origins of different forms of valuation. If I have a certain form of valuation I may need to believe certain things—if I am a Christian I may need to believe certain things about the origin of Christian forms of valuation. So if those beliefs are undermined, I may feel my values undermined, too, but this is as it were *my* problem, not part of the intention of the genealogy. For Nietzsche as genealogist: '... the value of a prescription "Thou shalt" ... is completely independent of ... the opinions [people might have] about it and from the weeds of error with which it was perhaps overgrown ...' just as the value of a medicine is independent of what the sick person *thinks* about it (GS 345).

It is a particular and idiosyncratic problem of Christianity that it cultivates truthfulness and introspection and is a form of valuation which requires its devotees to make claims and have beliefs that won't stand up to truthful introspective scrutiny (such as that moral action arises from altruistic sources). This means that Christianity dissolves itself (GM III. 27; GS 357) and Nietzsche's genealogy will contribute to that process. That genealogy is experienced by the Christian as a form of criticism need not imply that that is how it looks from the perspective of genealogists themselves. For the Christian it may be a terrible indictment of Christianity that it requires its devotees to lie to themselves (and others). For Nietzsche it is a fact that Christianity is a tissue of lies, but this fact is of no particular evaluative significance; he has no objection to lying *per se*, but only to those forms of lying that in fact sap human vitality, turn the will against itself, denigrate life, or stunt 'the growth of the plant "man"' (BGE 44; cf. EH 'Why I am a Destiny', 7).

A genealogy of Christianity/modern morality/ascetic ideals won't *in itself* legitimize or justify Nietzsche's new positive valuation of life/will, and isn't in itself a criticism of alternative valuations. What a new form of valuation does, it will be recalled, is take over and reinterpret existing forms of living and acting. 'Science' in Nietzsche's wide sense of that term (which includes philology and history) is one part of our existing form of life. It has a value which is independent of its origin in the Christian ascetic ideal (because value is independent of origin, GS 345). The same is true specifically of the 'grey' science of history/genealogy (GM, Preface, 7), a science which makes extensive use of our 'sense for *facts*, the last and most valuable of our senses' (A 59) to discover 'what is documented, what can really be ascertained, what was really there' (GM, Preface, 7). Nietzsche's genealogy then can start from his own 'historical and philological training' (GM, Preface, 3) and has at its disposal a rich pre-existing set of sensibilities, ways of proceeding, canons of evidence, notions of what is more plausible and what less plausible (GM, Preface, 4).

Nietzsche clearly thinks he can give an historically more accurate and plausible account of the emergence and development of our Christian morality from the perspective of his own new positive valuation of life than Christians themselves can from the standpoint of their own ascetic ideals. Christian truthfulness (and the apparatus of scientific history it gives rise to) will do in the Christian account of the development of our morality, leaving the field to Nietzsche's account. If Nietzsche's account is in this sense 'better' he will, he thinks, have succeeded in 'taking over' or 'gaining mastery of' a significant part of our existing form of life.

Nietzsche's genealogy of our ascetic morality doesn't yield a direct

'justification' of his positive valuation of the will and life, but the fact that he can from his perspective give a genealogy that is *more* acceptable to the grey science (on that science's own terms) than traditional accounts are, might be thought to provide a kind of indirect justification of Nietzsche's valuation. Whether or not this is the best way to think about this issue depends very much on what exactly one means by 'justification'.

Nietzsche's ability to give a genealogy of Christian morality which is historically superior to any other available certainly doesn't show that his positive valuation of life is 'true': 'Judgments, value-judgments about life, pro or contra, can in the final analysis never be true; they have value only as symptoms. . . .' (TI, 'The Problem of Socrates', 2). There are, Nietzsche thinks, no non-circular, non-contextual standards with reference to which such a value-judgment about life itself could vindicate itself. In the final analysis there is just self-affirmation (of life) or the reverse.

Nietzsche also clearly does not believe that it in any way follows from this that our whole fabric of factual discourse is simply abolished, annulled, or reduced to some kind of arbitrary play of volitions. History in the service of life can and must be *better* history than history purportedly pursued for its own sake, for the sake of the 'truth', or as an end in itself.

For Nietzsche the success of his genealogy, the fact that it is better history than alternatives, is a sign or symptom of the greater vitality of the perspective from which the genealogy was carried out. This is of great importance to Nietzsche because he judges things by the vitality they exhibit, and that the perspective which gives the highest value to life-enhancement shows itself to possess the highest vitality is for Nietzsche no tautology or triviality. It might in principle have been that a perspective devoted to the pursuit of pure science for its own sake had the greatest vitality (i.e. produced the greatest number of particular interesting hypotheses that turned out to be plausible and well-supported by the evidence, gave fruitful guidance for the organization of social life, contributed to the flourishing of the arts, etc.).

For those of us not able to adopt Nietzsche's perspective and form of valuation it would perhaps be sufficient that his genealogy gives a more plausible and well-supported account of our puzzling history than other available alternatives (if that turned out to be the case).²⁸

²⁸ I have profited from helpful comments on a draft of this essay by Michael Hardimon (MIT), Michael Rosen (Lincoln College, Oxford), and Quentin Skinner (Christ's College, Cambridge).

NIETZSCHE, GENEALOGY, HISTORY

MICHEL FOUCAULT

I

Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.

On this basis, it is obvious that Paul Ree¹ was wrong to follow the English tendency in describing the history of morality in terms of a linear development—in reducing its entire history and genesis to an exclusive concern for utility. He assumed that words had kept their meaning, that desires still pointed in a single direction, and that ideas retained their logic; and he ignored the fact that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys. From these elements, however, genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. Finally, genealogy must define even those instances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized (Plato, at Syracuse, did not become Mohammed).

Genealogy, consequently, requires patience and a knowledge of details, and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. Its "cyclopean monuments" (GS 7) are constructed from "discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method"; they cannot be the product of "large and well-meaning errors" (HH 3). In short, genealogy demands

From Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 76–100; first pub. in D. F. Bouchard, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

¹ Ed.: See GM, Preface, 4, 7.