



#69 Nietzsche and Morality: The Higher Man and The Herd

In the Preface to his classic work *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche wrote:

“What if a regressive trait lurked in “the good man,” likewise a danger, an enticement, a poison, a narcotic, so that the present lived at the expense of the future? Perhaps in more comfort and less danger, but also in a smaller-minded, meaner manner? ... So that morality itself were to blame if man never attained the highest power and splendor possible for the type man? So that morality itself was the danger of dangers?” (On the Genealogy of Morality)

Most people do not question why things are considered morally good or evil, rather uncritically, and largely unconsciously, they adopt the “value judgments of good and evil” dominant within their society.

For the past 2000 years, the dominant morality in the West, according to Nietzsche, has been an “anti-natural” morality, which, in his words, turns “against the instincts of life”. Nietzsche foresaw this morality as reigning over the Western world for foreseeable future, and was to him “the danger of dangers” – a morality in which all individuals, even those with the potential to rise above the mediocre mass, are pressured into becoming “*a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, and mediocre.*” (*Beyond Good and Evil*)

Why has an “anti-natural” morality – a “poison” which has spread “through the entire body of mankind” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*) – gained dominion over Western civilization? To answer this question Nietzsche’s categorization of individuals into two distinct types: the higher human beings, and those who belong to the herd, must be examined.

Within the category of the higher human beings, there are two main types. There are creative geniuses, “*the men of great creativity, the really great men according to my understanding*” (*The Will to Power*), who, through a rare combination of nature and nurture, are able to devote their life to a craft and bestow upon the world astounding works of beauty.



Along with creative geniuses, there are the more numerous higher humans who do not scale the heights of genius, and thus hidden from the public eye, their lives are “without songs and singers” (The Dawn). Yet the life of this more common higher man is not qualitatively different from the life of the creative genius; both share similar character traits which separate them from the herd.

Higher humans have a unifying life project, and are consumed by the drive to actualize their lofty goals. This unifying project is not undertaken for short-term gratification, but as a result of the higher man’s vast historical perspective, is a form of work performed under the eye of centuries – a goal whose effects will remain long after the physical death of the higher man.

As Nietzsche wrote in Human All Too Human:

“[The modern] individual focuses too narrowly on his own short lifespan... and wants to pluck the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and so no longer likes to plant those trees that demand a century of constant tending and are intended to provide shade for long successions of generations.” (Human All Too Human)

For this type of lofty work the higher man requires his solitude and freedom from the herd – the “innumerable...small and pitiable men” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra). As Nietzsche wrote:

“The concept of greatness entails being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

Standing alone and living independently, the higher man remains oblivious to the petty concerns which occupy the herd, and thus is immune to both the praise and criticism emanating from the mouths of the many.

“There is a solitude within him that is inaccessible to praise or blame, his own justice that is beyond appeal” (The Will to Power)

Aware of the momentous task which lies before him, and the potential for greatness which lies within him, the higher man feels a sense of reverence



towards himself; and even in the presence of great suffering, affirms life as a *“proud and well-turned out human being who says Yes, who is sure of the future, who guarantees the future.”* (*Ecce Homo*)

In contrast to these higher humans, there exist the many – the herd. The herd is composed of two types: the last man, and the slave.

The last man is the quintessential mediocre man. Striving solely for comfort and contentment, an end which makes him lazy and contemptible, the last man is wholly devoid of any creative urge within, and blind to higher values which render creativity possible.

The slave, in contrast, is a weak and sickly human being, who suffers from himself and is filled with what Nietzsche called resentment – a festering hatred of life generated by feelings of impotence in the face of an external reality he feels to be overpowering and threatening.

“There is among men as in every other animal species an excess of failures, of the sick, degenerating, infirm, who suffer necessarily; the successful cases are, among men, too, always the exception” (*Beyond Good and Evil*)

The presence of resentment conjures feelings of envy within the slave towards all those who do not suffer as they do – namely, the higher human beings. This envy motivates the slave to take vengeance on the higher humans. Banding together to obtain a “communal feeling of power” – the only type of power available to the slave – and under the pretext of calls for equality, the slave attempts to bring down to a more mediocre level all those higher than him through the construction of a slave, or herd, morality.

“The morality that would un-self man is the morality of decline par excellence—the fact, “I am declining,” transposed into the imperative, “all of you ought to decline”...This only morality that has been taught so far, that of un-selfing, reveals a will to the end; fundamentally, it negates life.” (*Ecce Homo*)

A herd morality inverts the natural values of life. The individual who is strong and independent – who attains feelings of power spontaneously through their



creative endeavors and “great health” – is deemed by herd morality to be “evil”. On the other hand, all those who belong to the herd: the mediocre last men, and the weak and impotent slaves – the “vengeful disguised as judges” (OGM) – are deemed to be “good”.

As Nietzsche put it in *Ecce Homo*:

‘Finally—this is what is most terrible of all—the concept of the good man signifies that one sides with all that is weak, sick, failure, suffering of itself...the principle of selection is crossed—an ideal is fabricated from the contradiction against the proud and well-turned-out human being who says Yes, who is sure of the future, who guarantees the future—and he is now called evil.— And all this was believed, as morality!’ (Ecce Homo)

Herd morality is the “danger of dangers” because of its ability to seduce those anxious and fearful in the face of the uncertainty and isolation associated with striving for greatness. In the confusion and distress of their development, longing to “rest from themselves for once...so as to be free from what oppresses them” (*The Will to Power*), herd morality acts as a Siren’s voice which offers the potential higher man a way to escape from his burdensome fate, into the comfort of mediocrity and immersion in the mass.

If herd morality becomes too effective in bringing down all that is higher and extraordinary – nihilism will creep over the world. Without the higher values embodied by the higher men, creativity, works of astounding beauty, and the capacity to strive for ideals, will be absent. Instead the values of comfort and contentment so, cherished by the herd, will be worshipped as the supreme values, and as a result the herd will engulf all of mankind and “existence [will] be deprived of its great character” (*Ecce Homo*).

Nietzsche’s fears of such a world were expounded in a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

“We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent... Here precisely is



what has become a fatality...together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary—what is nihilism today if it is not that?—We are weary of man.” (On the Genealogy of Morality)

In the attempt to prevent future generations from succumbing to this all engulfing levelling effect, Nietzsche spent much time in his writings performing a “revaluation of values”, hoping to lessen the effect of herd morality on the development of higher men.

Such a revaluation of values is dependent upon the realization that herd morality is not an objective and universal morality binding on all, but is merely

“one type of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other types, above all higher moralities, are, or ought to be possible.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

While herd morality “says stubbornly...’I am morality itself, and nothing besides is morality” (Beyond Good and Evil), the higher individual must realize that “The ideas of the herd should rule in the herd – but not reach out beyond it” (The Will to Power). He must pay no attention to herd morality’s claims of universality, its values and moral “oughts”, but instead must discover his own higher values to assist him in accomplishing his unifying life-project.

In discovering his own higher values, the higher man must realize that as a highly differentiated individual with a unique vision of life, his good is his alone, and therefore he must not preach or impose his higher morality on others. As Zarathustra advised:

“My brother, if you have a virtue and she is your virtue, then you have her in common with nobody.” Even naming one’s virtue would make her too common; if one must speak of her, it should be: “This is my good; this I love; it pleases me wholly; thus alone do I will the good. I do not will it the law of a god; I do not will it as human statute and need”. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)



In Nietzsche's time, as in ours, there exist a plethora of individuals who desire to persecute and bring down those who rise above the mediocre mass, masking their envy with calls for equality. These ideas will therefore seem elitist and distasteful to the great majority of people. But for Nietzsche, these ideas were not meant for the many:

“Our highest insights must – and should – sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them” (Beyond Good and Evil)

Nietzsche was gravely concerned with ensuring the world would remain fertile for the growth of true human excellence. Thus he wrote for the higher man alone; urging him to overcome the temptations of herd morality and instead to proceed on his own heroic life-path, and in doing so provide inspiration for future generations of potential higher men.

But Nietzsche was not optimistic that the future would be kind to the existence of higher humans. Herd morality is a powerful beast with the force of the majority behind it, and for the last two millennia has waged

“a common war on all that is rare, strange, privileged, the higher man, the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, and the abundance of creative power and masterfulness.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

Herd morality underpins not only socialist ideologies, the proponents of which Nietzsche called “socialist dolts and flatheads” (Beyond Good and Evil) who wish to bring about the “degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal” (Beyond Good and Evil), but also the numerous social justice movements which threaten to engulf the Western world with a new wave of herd morality.

Given that herd morality is alive and well in the modern day, we can, with Nietzsche, pose a question he believed highly pertinent in his times, and which remains so in ours:

“Today – is greatness possible?” (Beyond Good and Evil)



But apart from the question as to whether true greatness is possible today, the fact that herd morality is alive and well must be a cause of concern from another angle. For the slave, despite the innocent facade he displays with his herd morality and calls for equality, does not desire to change the world for the better. Instead, driven by resentment and envy, he seeks to gain social and political power for the purpose of provoking destruction as compensation for his own personal impotencies and failures.

The following insight of Nietzsche's proves to be a pertinent warning for the modern world:

“When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, “May the whole world perish!” This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is “If I cannot have something, no one can have anything, no one is to be anything!” (The Dawn)