Nietzsche's 'histories' of morality

One of Nietzsche's primary concerns in providing a history of morality is to understand how certain values (pity, selflessness, etc.), which he associates with 'herd' morality, became values. 'Morality', both its scope and its psychology (e.g. conscience, guilt), is a product of historical development. We can't understand a moral value or psychological state unless we use history, because that value or state frequently often inherits several different meanings from different times in the past. Through understanding its history, we can distinguish the different meanings and different feelings, and see how and why they changed over time. In turn, this helps us to understand that there are alternatives to these values and states.

Nietzsche tells several stories about how pity, self-denial and so on became values, how 'herd morality' came to dominate. One is from the perspective of the 'masters'; one is from the perspective of the 'slaves'; a third explanation draws on the role of evolution in forming human nature. The three stories should be seen as complementary, together building up the whole picture. A fourth history identifies various stages in the development of morality.

HISTORY 1: THE 'MASTERS'

In §§257, 258, and 262, Nietzsche gives us one such history. Every 'higher' or noble culture began with barbarians, 'predatory' humans who conquered either the 'more well-behaved, peaceable' ones or 'crumbling cultures'. They establish an 'aristocratic' class, based in ideas of a natural hierarchy between people, who dominated by their stronger will to power. This class is the origin of ideas of 'nobility'.

The aristocratic class – Nietzsche has in mind the aristocratic societies of ancient Rome and Greece – faced challenging conditions, wars with other societies, the threat of revolt by those oppressed. These conditions made for strong, unified people with a harsh and intolerant set of values. Such a class has no qualms about using 'lower' human beings for its own ends; this is itself understood as 'justice' (§265) and 'natural'. The whole of society is understood to exist for their sake, for the sake of what is great and noble.

Over time, conditions change, and life for the aristocrats becomes easy. So the attachment to discipline, both self-discipline and severe punishment, fades away as it is no longer necessary. Individuals emerge as individuals, varied from one another, rather than expressions of class values. They assert their individual wills and values, and both good and bad develop new forms. The old unity of values, of ‘instincts’, is broken, leading to a sense of decay and misunderstanding. This new danger is located not in enemies or slaves, but among neighbours and even in oneself. The great, strong and harsh will has dissipated and become corrupt. The new danger is met with a new morality, one based on fear of the individual. What remains, and what makes sense, is the ‘mediocre’, a morality that encourages people to be the same.
This is one way, Nietzsche says, that values associated with greatness were replaced by values that favoured the majority, the ‘herd’. We can identify the story of ‘decline’ with several points in history: first, changes in ancient Greek societies, between 800BC (the time of Homer’s tales of war) and 250BC, after which Greek empire was slowly eclipsed by the rise of the Roman empire; second, changes in the Roman empire between 400BC and 300AD (when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity); and once more, in changes in European societies between the Middle Ages and the modern period (e.g. Nietzsche refers to the French Revolution).

What is noble today is not identical to its origins in these aristocratic societies. The very earliest nobles, descendents of the barbarians, are fairly boring in their approach to life and their indifference to suffering. By contrast, Nietzsche repeatedly praises the creativity that the constraints of ‘herd’ morality has produced (§§46, 59, 188). It is not until the will to power turns back against the self, seeks to exercise power over its own instincts, as in the ascetic ideal, that things get interesting. Second, the aristocrats’ greatness was that of a united class, and the independence of free spirits and new philosophers was not recognisable then. However, there are continuities between noble aristocracies of the past and ‘nobility’ today.

**HISTORY 2: THE SLAVES**

The ascetic ideal is paradoxical for Nietzsche. It seems to oppose life and the will itself; and yet all values are an expression of the will to power. How could it have been adopted at all, and how could it have become so widespread? Answering these questions will complete the natural history of morals.

The spread of the ascetic ideal (in the West) originates in the slave revolt (see the handout on ‘Master and slave morality’, which Nietzsche says began with the Jewish prophets and continued with Christianity. It was not, then, slaves but priests (and saints) who first held the ascetic ideal. This is only suggested in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but developed at length in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III.

The priests do not have the direct, expressive will to power as the aristocrats. They resent the power of the aristocrats and the respect they have gained, but they cannot express this directly. So they teach that aristocratic values are evil and decadent, and praise a life of poverty and self-denial, the opposite of the aristocratic ideal. They develop the idea of God to support this revaluation. God will punish evil-doers (the aristocrats) and reward the good (the slaves). They create a standard by which the nobles are inferior to themselves and the common people. So they use the ascetic ideal to gain power as teachers, and therefore leaders, of the people. Nietzsche connects this account to Christianity’s gaining power in the Roman empire, although the ‘priest’ type exists everywhere, he says.

But why should people listen to the priests accept this revaluation? What is the appeal?

The aristocrats: the ancient aristocrats were amazed by the phenomenon of the saint, respecting the self-discipline involved in self-denial: ‘in it they recognized anew and were able to honour their own strength’ (§51). They made the mistake of thinking that the ‘monstrous denial’ required by the ascetic ideal could not be for nothing, and so become susceptible to the saint’s values.
The common people: the praised life of poverty and self-denial is the common person’s life. They suffer physically, but also mentally, through the ressentiment they feel towards the aristocrats. But what is worst is the thought that their suffering is meaningless. The ascetic ideal gives meaning to their suffering, providing two outlets for their ressentiment: first, that the aristocrats can be blamed (an imaginary form of revenge), but second and more centrally, that they are themselves the cause of their suffering. The ascetic ideal condemns the body, our instincts, our sensuous desires; yet we are animals with these desires. Our suffering is our punishment for being what we are, for not successfully transcending the body and the world, for not living up to the ascetic ideal. This makes suffering meaningful, and therefore bearable. Furthermore, the idea of a transcendent world after this one provides hope. And so the common people adopt the ascetic ideal.

Common people have only a weak will to power that struggles to maintain itself in the face of so much suffering. The denial of the will to power, the denial of this bodily life in favour of a spiritual life in a transcendent world, is a way in which their will and their lives succeed in maintaining themselves. So the ascetic ideal is an expression of their will to power.

HISTORY 3: MORALITY AND EVOLUTION

In §199, Nietzsche writes that ‘for as long as there have been humans, there have also been… a great many followers in proportion to the small number of commanders… obedience has until now been bred and practised best and longest among humans’. He continues later, ‘the herd instinct of obedience is inherited best, and at the cost of the skill in commanding’. In evolution, what does not reproduce well does not survive in future generations. What enables a person to get on well with many other people will favour most individuals and their reproductive success – but these will be ‘herd’ instincts and values, because by definition, the majority are the ‘herd’. What is exceptional, what is great, is rare. So evolution opposes greatness and favours what is common. The kind of ‘commanders’ the herd favours are tame, modest, hard-working and public-spirited, commanders who actually serve the herd rather than commanding them.

Nietzsche develops the point in §268: to communicate with and understand other people, we have to share experiences with them. What thoughts and feelings words immediately bring to mind reflects our values. So people of different types will have difficulty understanding each other. People who are commanders will be hard for other people, the ‘herd’, to understand. And so they rarely procreate. If we are to breed new philosophers, and new philosophers are to breed the human race to become greater, we will have to draw on ‘enormous counterforces’ since we are in conflict with the natural forces of evolution.

However, the constraint placed on the will to power by ‘herd’ morality has been creative; it is ‘the means by which the European spirit was bred to be strong, ruthlessly curious, and beautifully nimble’ (§188). This tension drives free spirits to overcome the ascetic ideal and prepare the conditions for new philosophers.

THE THREE STAGES OF MORALITY

In §32, Nietzsche talks about the different stages that morality has gone through. Depending on how we divide up his account, we can get three or five stages.
1. ‘Pre-moral’: In the first stage, of human pre-history, the value of an action depended entirely on its consequences. Motives were considered unimportant.

2. Moral:
   a. In the next stage (or part-stage), morality begins as the origins of an action became important. In order to be a morally good person, one needed to ‘look inwards’.
   b. But then a terrible mistake, still with us today: the ‘origin’ and value of an action was equated with the person’s intention, i.e. what the person consciously decided.

3. ‘Extra-moral’:
   a. The next stage, in the near future, will identify the value of a action not by what the person intended, which is superficial and misleading, but by what was not intentional (e.g. an ‘unintended’ consequence or the manner in which the action is done), which we can relate to what brought about the action that was not part of the intention.
   b. Finally, we will move beyond good and evil and new philosophers create new values.

Many remarks suggest that the master morality of the aristocrats accepted 2a, while the shift to 2b corresponds with the rise in slave morality, with the breakdown of the unity of the instincts and the resulting concern with the danger ‘in oneself’. With these changes, identifying the particular thought or motive becomes important, and the illusion that we can identify particular motives in this way as the causes of actions is encouraged.