On the Genealogy of Morals

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche grew up in a religious family in Röcken, near Leipzig (in present-day Germany), with his grandmother, mother, and two younger sisters. His father and younger brother died when he was a young boy. Soon after commencing undergraduate studies in theology at the University of Bonn, Nietzsche abandoned his goal because he felt that historical evidence undermined the teachings of Christianity. Nietzsche decided to pursue philology (the study of the history of languages) instead, and he became heavily influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy (which had a profound influence on his thought). When Nietzsche was 24 years old, he landed a prestigious academic post in classical philology at the University of Basel, where he worked for 10 years. During this decade, Nietzsche became a close friend of composer Richard Wagner and wrote extensively in praise of Wagner's work, but he found himself growing disillusioned with Wagner's nationalist political views during the formation of the German Empire. Nietzsche ended his friendship with Wagner before resigning his post in Basel due to ill health in 1878. For the next decade of his life, Nietzsche lived nomadically, traveling and writing in Europe as a stateless person. He planned to start an academic commune with his close friends Paul Ree and Lou Salome, but his plan failed after Salome rejected Nietzsche's marriage proposal and distanced herself from Nietzsche. By 1882, Nietzsche was alienated from most of his social acquaintances, as well as his family (particularly his sister Elisabeth, who had grown increasingly anti-Semitic). Nietzsche began habitually using drugs, including opium and chloral hydrate, while his health continued to decline. Shortly after publishing *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche had a mental breakdown and was diagnosed with syphilis in 1889. Nietzsche's sisters and mother cared for him at home for the final decade of his life. Despite his tumultuous life, Nietzsche published over 15 philosophical books, beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872 and ending with *Ecco Homo* (written in 1888 but published posthumously in 1906). Nietzsche's philosophical writing had a profound influence on philosophy, giving rise to existentialism, critical theory, structuralism, and post-structuralist movements that dominated philosophical discourse for the subsequent century. Nietzsche's writing style is earmarked by his tendency to favor poetic aphorisms and controversial polemics over dry academic writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nietzsche witnessed the formation of the German Empire in 1871, and he was greatly troubled by rising nationalist politics in his lifetime. In much of his writing, Nietzsche cautioned that German culture was in crisis, and he would likely not have been surprised that Germany was involved in two world wars shortly after his death (World War I in 1914–1918, and World War II in 1939–1945). There was also a rising sentiment of anti-Semitism in Germany at the time, which greatly troubled Nietzsche. He fell out with his sister and most of his family over their anti-Semitic and religious beliefs. Though he had no idea at the time, Nietzsche's anti-Semitic sister Elisabeth began rewriting and editing Nietzsche's work after his mental decline and circulating it in rising Nazi circles after his death. Nietzsche would have been horrified to learn that the doctored versions of his work had a strong influence on Adolf Hitler and the policies of the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany, which culminated in World War II. Around the same time, Nietzsche's (unedited) writings gave rise to an intellectual movement known as the Frankfurt School, spearheaded by Marxist-Jewish scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who were critical of rising fascism in European politics. As such, Nietzsche's writing has controversially been used to both justify and condemn the horrors of World War II.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Nietzsche was heavily influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's 1818 philosophical book *The World as Will and Representation*, which he discusses at length in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Schopenhauer's idea that reality is driven by a universal striving sensation shapes Nietzsche's idea that the human experience is underpinned by instinctive striving urges. Nietzsche was also influenced by Charles Darwin's 1859 book on evolution, *On the Origin of Species*, through which Nietzsche derived his idea than humans, like all animals, are driven by primal animalistic urges. Nietzsche also discusses several philosophical books in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, including Paul Ree's 1877 book *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* and Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (both of which Nietzsche disagrees with). Many subsequent social theorists have been influenced by Nietzsche's work, including Michel Foucault, who leverages Nietzsche's discussions of punishment and power in European society to formulate his own theories on the role of power in structuring modern society, notably in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** On the Genealogy of Morals
- **When Written:** 1887
- **Where Written:** Germany

- **When Published:** 1887
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Philosophy
- **Setting:** Late 19th-century Europe
- **Climax:** Nietzsche argues that the desire to escape life's suffering by suppressing emotional, bodily, and materialistic urges actually makes people suffer more.
- **Antagonist:** Ascetic priest
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Animal Lover. Nietzsche reportedly had his mental breakdown after seeing a horse being whipped in the street in Turin, Italy in 1889. Nietzsche reportedly ran up to the horse and flung his arms around it, before collapsing in the street and being arrested for causing a public disturbance.

Unlucky in Love. Nietzsche was plagued by romantic failure throughout his life. It's rumored that he had an unrequited infatuation with his best friend Richard Wagner's wife for years. Then, he fell in love with Lou Salome, who rejected Nietzsche and ran off with his friend Paul Ree (although she later rejected Ree as well). Popular legend holds that Nietzsche was so frustrated by his romantic failures that he began to frequent brothels and contracted syphilis, which triggered in his mental breakdown.

PLOT SUMMARY

Nietzsche begins by saying he thinks that humanity doesn't really know or understand itself. He wants to explore the history of morals, to see where they come from and how they evolve. He wants to know if conventional ideas about what's "good" and "evil" in 19th-century Europe (or "modern" Europe, as he calls it) help humanity thrive and flourish. He suspects that they don't.

Nietzsche's "First Essay" focuses on the concepts of "good," "bad," and "evil." Nietzsche says that British psychologists think, like he does, that people aren't born with ingrained morals—they *learn* them. British psychologists think that selfless behavior is useful in early societies, so it becomes entrenched in conventional ideas about morality, but Nietzsche disagrees. He looks at the etymology of the word "good" and discovers that in early usage, "good" means "aristocratic" or noble. It references society's most powerful people. This means that whoever's the most powerful person in a society determines what's good. In such societies, like Ancient Greece, there's no concept of evil. People who aren't strong and powerful are simply less good, rather than fundamentally evil. Societies ruled by knights or warriors tend to think that being strong, aggressive, and ambitious are good. Nietzsche thinks that "priestly" morality evolves from historically oppressed people around the birth of Christianity. Oppressed people resent their oppressors, so they "revolt" and develop a new moral code that depicts their own own humble, patient, and obedient behavior as "good" and demonizes people they hate (their oppressors) as barbaric, aggressive **beasts of prey**. Nietzsche thinks this has catastrophic effects on European society. All around him in Europe, he smells **bad air** that emanates from people who aren't thriving, but rotting. People are making themselves miserable because they think they can choose to be nonviolent, meek, and obedient, but they misunderstand human nature. Such people think they'll achieve "bliss" in heaven, but to Nietzsche, this is a lie. He thinks scholars need to study the value of the morals a society upholds, and think about what they're good *for*.

Nietzsche begins his "Second Essay" by looking at promises. In order to keep promises, people have to train themselves to develop a conscience, so that they'll feel guilty for breaking promises and be more inclined to keep them. Many people assume that developing a conscience is a good thing, but Nietzsche thinks the social customs that encourage people to develop a conscience are entrenched in pain, fear, and violence circulating around notions of "debt" and "credit." Nietzsche then shifts his focus to punishment, arguing that when a person (a debtor) breaks a promise, they fail to deliver on a promise, and so they owe a debt to the person who expected to receive some something from them (a creditor). Punishment entitles the creditor to claim compensation for what they're owed in the form of physical pain. The creditor effectively gets the satisfaction of seeing someone suffer until the debt is paid off. Nietzsche says that deriving satisfaction from being cruel is a natural human instinct, which is why historical festivities often included violent components. Nietzsche thinks that humanity was **healthier** when people weren't so ashamed about this aspect of human nature.

Nietzsche then turns to justice. He thinks that this, too, is about collecting debts. People in a society promise to behave in certain ways, and when they break their promises, the creditor (society's legal system) claims compensation by making the criminal suffer, which yields a certain satisfaction for the populace. Nietzsche thinks that ancient societies were healthier because they created other outlets for people to express their aggression and feel that satisfaction, so people didn't need to use to the legal system to make criminals suffer or to feel satisfaction from aggression through some twisted notion of justice. Nietzsche thinks that customs don't necessarily get progressively better over time. It really depends on who's in power—and how they shape customs (like punishment) to achieve their aims. Nietzsche thinks that punishment in European society doesn't actually service the culture's aims. People think that punishment teaches people to

feel guilty so they won't break laws in the future, which will help them succeed in life. But Nietzsche disagree—he thinks that guilt is incredibly unhealthy.

According to Nietzsche, ancient humans were nomadic predators who used their aggressive instincts to kill prey. As they formed societies, they began to direct that aggression towards conquering territory. Modern society doesn't have any spaces where people can be aggressive, so they repress that instinct and end up unleashing their aggression on themselves: they torture themselves with guilt for having aggressive instincts, which causes tremendous mental anguish and suffering. Christian values exacerbate this suffering: people try to "tame" their "animal selves" to become "good," and they start believing their natural human instincts are "evil," which makes them suffer even more. Nietzsche thinks that modern humans have demonized our natural instincts for too long, and he longs for something that will turn the situation around.

Nietzsche's "Third Essay" focuses on ascetic ideals, which advocate abstaining or withdrawing from emotional, bodily, and material urges in order to practice "poverty, chastity, and humility." Nietzsche wants to see where and how ascetic ideals come up in European culture. He sees them in operatic composer Wagner's art because Wagner's later work celebrates thinks like chastity. Nietzsche prefers Goethe and Hafiz's poems because they play with the tension between sensual and spiritual aspects of life, like Wagner's earlier work. Wagner's later work, however, seems like a shallow mouthpiece for his religious views—which, to Nietzsche, makes his art bad. Nietzsche turns to philosopher Kant's views about art, which he finds idiotic. Kant thinks that a person needs to maintain an emotionally and psychologically distanced attitude to appreciate the beauty in art, but Nietzsche thinks this is nonsense. Nietzsche agrees with writer Stendhal that art's great power is its ability to move, excite, and stimulate people. Philosopher Schopenhauer thinks that contemplating beautiful art facilitates a calming, distanced sensation that gives people a break from the relentless striving or "willing" feeling that underscores reality. Nietzsche thinks that Schopenhauer might feel that personally when he looks at art, but many people look at art to stir up their emotions, not to calm them.

Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic ideal also surfaces in most scholarly practices in European culture. Philosophers tend to enjoy thinking, so they prefer to live quietly and shun the distractions of everyday life. They also tend to privilege intellectual thinking and depict emotional and bodily aspects of life as primitive. They usually think that retreating from life to think gives them a more objective perspective on the world, but Nietzsche disagrees, since they're always looking from their own subjective perspective. Nietzsche characterizes people who find value in distancing themselves from everyday life as "ascetic priests." Nietzsche thinks the ascetic ideal manifests most tangibly in Christianity: religious leaders want to escape the pain of mortality, so they tell themselves that withdrawing from their emotional urges, materialistic aims, and bodily desires will give them access to immortality in heaven. Nietzsche thinks that this is a perverse attitude that makes European society sick. Ascetic priests position themselves as leaders who will heal people's suffering; this makes them feel powerful, which diminishes their own suffering. But in doing so, they encourage people to turn their aggression on themselves and feel guilty for having natural human urges, which makes people suffer more. Nietzsche says that in other cultures, spiritual people use tremendous discipline to withdraw from life so that they can move beyond all emotional experience and feel a blissful sensation of nothingness—but he thinks that Christian ascetic priests do the opposite. They control people's behavior by telling them to act charitable and kind, but they also rile up people's emotions by encouraging them to feel passionate about the Christian moral code. This, to Nietzsche, encourages mass hysteria (like witch hunts).

Although scientists tend to think they escape the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche doesn't believe this is the case. It's true that scientists take God out of the picture, but they still need to live quiet, focused lives to do their work. They also tend to value truth and objectivity, meaning that they think (like philosophers do) that suppressing emotional, bodily, and material urges and being rational and detached somehow brings them closer to seeing the world objectively. To Nietzsche, this kind of thinking just embodies the ascetic ideal. In fact, to Nietzsche, anyone who thinks taking a step back from life will help them think more objectively about what to believe—which includes atheists, amateur thinkers ("armchair scholars"), and historians—merely end up reinforcing the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic ideal is so pervasive in European culture that all he smells is bad air from the rotting corpses of people who are stunting their lives by stepping back from living. Nietzsche thinks that European society has grown more secular—meaning it's moved on from Christian *dogma*—but it's still entrenched in Christian *morality*, encapsulated in this idea that holding back or abstaining from life's messiness has some moral or intellectual advantage.

Nietzsche concludes that when it comes down to it, one question plagues humankind: the meaning of life. He thinks the ascetic ideal is so pervasive because it helps people feel that their lives have a purpose or meaning. Unfortunately, it also makes people feel guilty, hate their natural human instincts, suffer, and desire "oblivion" (an end to it all). Nietzsche wryly concludes that even aligning with the ascetic ideal betrays some desire. Desiring, after all, is a fundamental aspect of human nature, which is the point Nietzsche has been making all along.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Friedrich Nietzsche – Nietzsche is the author and sole voice of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche is highly skeptical about the 19th-century European culture of his time. He thinks that his culture is in crisis, because it makes life worse—rather than better—for humanity. Nietzsche thinks that human beings are fundamentally predators, because our ancestors hunted to kill prey. Nietzsche doesn't believe there's anything wrong with this, as it's just part of human nature to be aggressive. Nietzsche believes that Ancient Greek and Roman cultures were much more progressive than his own culture, because they recognized that people are fundamentally aggressive, and they provided public outlets within their societies for people to express these urges and get them out of their systems (such as violent festivities and sports). European society, however, tries to deny the savage parts of human nature. Nietzsche thinks that European culture is heavily influenced by Christianity, which advocates self-denial: holding back from life's emotional, sensual, and social components. To Nietzsche, all aspects of European life are affected by this idea. Even secular scholars, like scientists and philosophers, try to emulate a calm, rational, demeanor, and think that emotional and bodily urges are primitive. Nietzsche thinks that European culture forces people to reject, repress, and silence their "animal" selves—the aggressive, primal, emotional, bodily, active aspects of the human experience. To Nietzsche, this is highly regressive, because it makes people hate themselves for being human, which makes them suffer. He thinks ancient cultures were more progressive, because they embraced all aspects of what it means to be human, which allowed people to live as fully realized human beings, flourish, and experience joy.

Ascetic priest – Nietzsche characterizes an ascetic priest as a person who believes that it's good to be humble, chaste, and poor by denying psychological urges and aspects of life that are emotional, bodily, and materialistic. Ascetic priests include Christian religious leaders who believe that holding back from life's sensual, emotional, and material aspects to practice "poverty, chastity, and humility" will lead people to "bliss" in heaven. Nietzsche thinks that religious ascetic priests depict themselves as leaders who help people, but really, they only exert power over the disenfranchised and make them suffer for believing natural human urges are "sinful." Ascetic priests also include nonreligious figures like scientists and philosophers who also value the quiet life: they like to think, and they believe intellectual ideas are more evolved than emotional and bodily sensations, which they denigrate in their theories as primitive. The ascetic priest is Nietzsche's central rival. Nietzsche thinks that ascetic priests—whether they're religious or secular—are pathological and perverse, because they endorse the ascetic ideal of withdrawing from life's messy day-to-day aspects. To Nietzsche, ascetic priests make people suffer, because they make people feel guilty for having natural bodily and emotional urges (which people can't help, as it's part of human nature). They advocate limiting people's exposure to all the things that make life joyful, such as love, sex, friendship, success, and wealth.

British psychologists – Nietzsche characterizes British psychologists as empirical thinkers. They believe that the mind is originally blank, and people learn concepts and ideas by perceiving the world around them, absorbing sensory data (sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste). Like Nietzsche, British psychologists tend to believe that people aren't born with an intrinsic moral code, but learn about morality from the society they live in. British psychologists put a lot of emphasis on selfless behavior, but Nietzsche thinks they're wrong about that because in ancient societies, being "good" meant being powerful, not being nice.

Richard Wagner – Wagner is a German operatic composer; he's Nietzsche's former friend but current enemy. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner used to be a good artist but became seduced by Christianity in later life, which ruined his art. To Nietzsche, Wagner's earlier operas (like *Luther's Wedding*) were bold, creative, complex, and interesting. Nietzsche thinks Wagner's later operas (like *Parsifal*) become shallow vehicles for moral posturing, which makes them both bad and culturally damaging.

Arthur Schopenhauer – Schopenhauer is a German philosopher who believes that all reality and existence is underpinned by a relentless, exhausting, striving sensation that he calls the "will." Schopenhauer thinks that of all the arts, music comes closest to capturing this sensation, because it isn't cluttered with static visual phenomena and it's always moving forward. Schopenhauer is a pessimist, because he thinks that the constant striving of the will makes life miserable. To Schopenhauer, the only time a person can get some relief from life's exhausting willing sensation is when they look at art, because he finds the experience is calming and absorbing. Nietzsche thinks that Schopenhauer is just personally frustrated and generalizes too much from his own subjective experience.

Immanuel Kant – Kant is a German philosopher who believes that people need to maintain emotional and personal detachment from art when they look at it. Kant argues that seeing something as beautiful requires a person to eliminate all the things they find personally interesting and focus on what's left over, which is the form, shape, or structure of the artwork. Kant also thinks that religious thinking limits the intellectual pursuit (which he believes is more objective). Nietzsche completely disagrees with Kant. Nietzsche thinks Kant, like most philosophers, is too enamored with trying to be detached and objective. In Nietzsche's view, Kant forgets that even the philosopher's detached perspective is much more subjective

and personal than Kant realizes.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Stendhal – Stendhal is a French writer who argues that artists want to excite, stimulate, and move their audiences with their work. Nietzsche agrees with Stendhal.

Dr. Paul Ree – Ree is a scholar who, like Nietzsche, studies the origins of moral behavior. Ree and Nietzsche both think that morals evolve over time, but Nietzsche disagrees with Ree's view on *how* morals evolve.

Napoleon Bonaparte – Napoleon was a French emperor. Nietzsche thinks that Napoleon was an anomaly in European culture because Napoleon was bold, active, and strong. This conflicts with Europe's Christianity-based moral code that advocates being patient, kind, and passive.

Eugen Dühring – Dühring is a German philosopher whom Nietzsche describes as "anti-Semitic" and "belligerent." Nietzsche thinks that Dühring represents the vengeful, hateful undertones of European culture that Nietzsche worries about.

Parsifal – Parsifal is the titular protagonist of Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. Parsifal is a simple country boy who shuns romantic and intellectual encounters to seek the Holy Grail. Nietzsche thinks that Parsifal is a reductive, moralizing character who exposes everything that's wrong with the heavy religious overtones of Wagner's late work.

Lucifer – Lucifer is the protagonist of Wagner's early opera *Luther's Wedding*. Nietzsche thinks that Luther is an interesting character who's bold and courageous because he doesn't shy away from being sensual.

Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus was a historical Jewish religious leader who became the central figure of Christianity.

Mr. Inquisitive and Foolhardy – Mr. Inquisitive and Foolhardy is the imaginary persona Nietzsche uses to address the championing of weakness and nonviolence among oppressed people.

Plato – Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher.

Spinoza – Spinoza was a Dutch philosopher.

François de La Rouchefoucald – La Rouchefoucald was a French author.

Herbert Spencer – Spencer was a British sociologist.

Henry Thomas Buckle – Buckle was an English historian.

Thomas Aquinas – Aquinas was an Italian theologian.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – Goethe was a German writer.

Hafiz – Hafiz was a Persian poet.

TERMS

Ascetic ideals – Ascetic ideals are values that advocate withdrawing, abstaining, or rejecting bodily, emotional, and material aspects of everyday life. Nietzsche says the Christian motto of "poverty, chastity, humility" is an ascetic ideal because it suggests that people need to abstain from material wealth, sensual urges, and emotional or egotistical feelings. Nietzsche also thinks that many nonreligious people practice the ascetic ideal. Any social practice that advocates withdrawing from life's messy day-to-day components also embodies the ascetic ideal. For example, philosophers and scientists need peace and quiet to think, so they tend to withdraw from life, or be ascetic, in that sense. Philosophers also privilege rational or intellectual thinking and depict feelings and bodily urges as inferior and primitive—in other words, they champion the ascetic ideal. An **ascetic priest** is a person who endorses the ascetic ideal.

Etymology – Etymology is the study of how word meanings change and evolve over time.

Pessimism – Pessimism is a philosophical term that applies to thinkers who believe the human experience is fundamentally painful, miserable, or characterized by suffering. **Schopenhauer** is a pessimist because he believes that human existence is driven by a relentless, striving, willing sensation that is exhausting.

Nihilism – Nihilism is the philosophical view that human existence is meaningless and futile. Nihilists believe that there's no life after death, and they consequently struggle to experience life with joy, knowing that it's just going to end.

Metaphysics – Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of reality. Metaphysical aspects of life are the abstract, invisible, immaterial components of reality that structure, underpin, or drive the human perception.

Will – The philosopher **Schopenhauer** thinks that the "will" is a universal, relentless, striving sensation that underpins all reality and experience. To Schopenhauer, the will is metaphysical—meaning he thinks that it's the basis of reality, and it gives shape to the world as we experience it.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GOOD AND EVIL

Nietzsche explores the historical and cultural origins of moral ideas—like "good," "bad," and

"evil"—in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche argues that although most modern Europeans assume that being kind, compassionate, patient, and gentle are fundamentally "good," while being violent, cruel, and craving power are fundamentally "evil," this is a relatively recent idea. Ancient Greek and Roman cultures, for instance, recognized that aggression is part of human nature, and they consequently embodied a "warrior" moral code that championed these values as part and parcel of what it means to be human. In such cultures, some people are born with natural or social privileges (meaning they are born into a "noble" position where they can better express their power), but there's no true concept of evil. A person can be foolish, unlucky, or ill-fated if things don't work out for them, but they are never considered evil. The Judeo-Christian doctrine articulates a completely different—and, to Nietzsche, worse—approach to morality. Oppressed people who have no outlet to exert their power start to demonize their "masters," or the powerful people in society, out of "resentment" and to depict them as evil. This means that all the aspects of humanity that were once considered good (such as aggression) become pathologized as evil, and the traits of the weak (such as being patient, meek, obedient, and gentle) are reconceptualized as good. The modern European conception of such behavior as intrinsically or fundamentally good is thus a fabrication. Nietzsche ultimately thinks that people shouldn't take European (Christian) moral beliefs—or "slave morality"—at face value, because such morals problematically command people to stifle their natural human instincts and become "weak," resentful, and "miserable."

Nietzsche argues that historically, being good used to mean being powerful. And while it was possible to be bad (i.e., less good or less powerful), there was no concept of "evil" before Judeo-Christian values arrived on the scene. Nietzsche traces the etymology of the word "good" in several languages to show that it originates from the word for "noble," meaning that prior civilizations considered the actions of the most powerful people in society, the nobility or aristocracy, as good. In cases where a particular culture's concept of good includes a racial or ethnic component—such as "noble blond"—it similarly exposes that the most powerful people, typically conquerors, are associated with the word good. Historically, powerful people haven't been meek, gentle, and obedient but the opposite: they are warriors who freely act out their natural human instincts to be aggressive, exert power over others, conquer territory, feel masterful, and experience life with depth and joy. Early historical cultures acknowledge that some people are less powerful, or less good, but they never consider such people to be fundamentally evil. Ancient Greek and Roman cultures embody the warrior approach to morality, and they even honor their enemies as heroic and noble warriors. Ancient cultures like these acknowledge that a person can be born with fewer natural gifts, or a lower social position, meaning that some people are "common," "foolish," or unlucky because they have fewer opportunities to express their power. However, there's no true concept of evil in these cultures. Even their deities strive to exert power over each other. A person who's unlucky is thought to have been dealt a bad hand by the gods, but there's nothing within them that makes them fundamentally evil.

Nietzsche thinks that the modern European moral code—which advocates being patient, kind, loving, and nonviolent in accordance with Judeo-Christian doctrine—has no intrinsic worth, because it emerges from the resentment of oppressed people in history who demonize their masters' powerful behavior as evil. For Nietzsche, oppressed people who have no outlet to express their power feel resentful toward their masters. They then begin to revolt and develop their own moral code that depicts powerful behavior as evil. Oppressed and disenfranchised people simultaneously lionize the opposite of powerful behavior—namely, gentle, patient, and obedient behavior—as morally good. This, to Nietzsche, is most evident in early Christian doctrine that emerges from figures like Jesus of Nazareth towards the end of the Roman Empire. Nietzsche argues that Europeans absorb Christian ideals into their moral values to such an extent that ideals like patience, obedience, self-restraint, and love—even for one's enemies—become so entrenched into the cultural consciousness that even non-religious people tend to assume such behaviors are intrinsically good. This, for Nietzsche, is where "democratic" ideas get their force, which is why he's skeptical about democracy.

To Nietzsche, the modern conception of good people as gentle, kind, obedient, and rational and evil people as violent, cruel, and savage emerged out of a resentful need to demonize history's powerful people, and it has no intrinsic worth. For Nietzsche, the Christian approach to morality is fundamentally problematic because it advocates that people hold themselves back from expressing aggression, which is a fundamental human instinct. Christian values thus demand that people try to be something "unnatural," which makes them miserable. Moreover, a person can never be as good as the Christian God, meaning they consider themselves fundamentally unworthy, which makes them suffer. Ultimately, Nietzsche explores the historical origins of concepts like good and evil to show that modern Europeans shouldn't assume that their society captures fundamental truths about the nature of good and evil. In fact, to Nietzsche, European culture does the exact opposite, since it characterizes behavior like aggression, power, and cruelty as evil, when such behavior is—in fact—natural and human, and it was once considered **healthy** and good.

THE REPRESSION OF HUMAN NATURE

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that Christian values have corrupted European society and triggered a regressive cultural crisis in late 19th-century Europe. Nietzsche believes that humans are

innate predators, but modern European society doesn't offer a healthy outlet for people's violent predatory instincts—essentially, human beings' primal need to feel the satisfaction of exerting power over their prey. To Nietzsche, the "ascetic" ideology of Judeo-Christian doctrine—centering on "poverty, chastity, and humility," or practicing restraint from life's pleasures—masks a perversion of human culture that makes it profoundly **sick**. To Nietzsche, most aspects of modern European human culture—including religion, philosophy, science, and law—aren't progressive but merely express the sadistic human urge for power and ultimately make people suffer. Nietzsche thus argues that European culture is in crisis because the Christian values on which its founded don't allow people to experience joy in living as we are meant to and instead forces us to manifest our inherent sadistic impulses in harmful ways.

Nietzsche believes that humankind has an innate drive to feel powerful, which is a part of our survival instinct. Prior to large societies, human beings had to hunt, kill, roam, and conquer territory in order to survive. But Nietzsche is clear that there's nothing wrong with this—human beings are simply hardwired to thrive off of conflict and cruelty, because it keeps us alive in the harsh, predatory natural world. Nietzsche argues that the primal human is a "**beast of prey**": we are hardwired to be predatory as a means of survive. Hunting and killing are essentially cruel behaviors, but without such instincts, humans wouldn't have survived the early days of our existence. Early humans were also "nomadic," instinctively seizing and protecting territory to survive. When people form small, isolated societies, they still practice "murder, arson, rape, and torture" outside the domain of their own territory, which are manifestations of an innate drive for violence and power. Historically, humankind thought there was nothing immoral about possessing these power-driven instincts. In fact, expressing such instincts give people a profound feeling of "joy" and "freedom" in acting true to ourselves. But Nietzsche notes that many powerful people in modern Europe assume that recent human civilization has triumphed by "taming" our "animal" selves (and our violent lust for power). To Nietzsche, this is a lie, because our instincts can't be changed. Instinctive, predatory human tendencies to express power, violence, and cruelty only become more dangerous to humanity when we try to suppress them.

Nietzsche argues that modern European culture, which centers on Christian values of "poverty, chastity, and humility," doesn't have healthy outlets for humankind's predatory, sadistic impulses, so these impulses inevitably emerge in more damaging ways. In Nietzsche's view, the law was originally designed to allow people to live full and active lives and carve out areas where conflict and aggression were permissible—but the modern European conceptions of justice exert "vengeance" on criminals in far more damaging ways. The European legal system is based on ideas of credit and debt, meaning that a person who breaks a law owes a debt to society—and justice is characterized as a legal right to inflict pain on the criminal in equal proportion to the debt owed. To Nietzsche, such a practice is evidence of the sadistic impulse in humankind emerging as resentful vengeance rather than healthy conflict. Christian religious leaders—or "ascetic priests"—promise to help those who suffer, but Nietzsche argues that they only cause more suffering as their followers deny their natural instincts. Essentially, ascetic priests exert power by falsely depicting themselves as healers who will lead others to "bliss" in the afterlife. Nietzsche believes that practicing the "ascetic ideology" of Christian values makes people suffer, because it forces them to feel guilty every time they feel their natural aggressive urges. Such people believe that they are evil, or sinful, for being human and having a natural instinct to exert power and thrive in the world. In exerting power, the ascetic priest feels a sense of mastery, which brings them joy—but their followers perpetually suffer because they believe that their inevitable instincts to exert power are evil, meaning they feel perpetually "unworthy."

Even many nonreligious thinkers (such as secular philosophers) embody the "ascetic ideal," arguing that humans are at their best when they use their rationality and suppress their "animalistic" emotional and bodily feelings. Such practices appeal to philosophers because they enjoy thinking and therefore want to rid themselves of distractions like commerce and romance. The desire to feel mastery over their emotions allows philosophers to exert their power (over emotional and bodily "distractions" in life), and they feel happy in being able to do so. As such, they tend to argue that cultivating "reason" is fundamentally better than getting bogged down in the messy emotional encounters of life. For many people, however, the same practices of restraint from life's daily pleasures only make them deny the aspects of life that will actually make them happy and fulfilled.

Nietzsche believes that we would experience life with profound "joy" if we accepted that we simply *are* power-driven beings, and we cultivated healthy public outlets to manage our innate desire for conflict and violence. Nietzsche argues that some historical cultures, like the Ancient Greeks, recognized and even embraced the "beast of prey" in humankind and were thus more progressive than modern Europeans. The Ancient Greeks provided healthy public outlets—like "war," "violent festivities," and public executions—for humans to express the cruel aspects of our nature. Harsh as they seem, Nietzsche believes that such "bizarre cruelties" are actually beneficial because they allow us to feel a healthy "joy" in expressing our natural instincts. Modern European culture—which has no such outlets—forces people to turn their instinctual cruelty inward on themselves. Instead of being expressed and released, this self-directed cruelty festers and continues unchecked, which causes great

"pain" and "misery." Thus, contrary to the modern belief that Christian morality is progressive, Nietzsche argues that modern European culture founded on this value system is actually regressive and damaging to humanity.

ART, BEAUTY, AND EMOTIONS

Nietzsche explores the relationship between art and emotional stimulation in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Many philosophers, like Kant, argue that recognizing beauty in art is only possible when humans maintain emotional distance from the art that we look at. Some philosophers, like Schopenhauer, even argue that the calm contemplation of beauty is the only mental space where humans can feel relief and solace from our relentless drive to constantly act. Nietzsche thinks such theorists only say these things because they know very little about the artistic endeavor, and they believe that humans (underneath all our messy emotions) should strive to be calm, rational beings. In fact, Nietzsche believes that the opposite is true: great art moves us, stimulates us, and stirs our emotions. In essence, it makes us feel alive, which is good. Philosophers who argue otherwise simply confuse what appeals to *them* with what appeals to *everybody*. Artists can also fall prey to this trap, and when they use their art to moralize against emotional and bodily desires (as operatic composer Wagner does), they make bad art. Nietzsche thus argues that when scholars claim that artistic contemplation should be more rational than emotional, or when artists use their art to moralize against emotional and bodily urges, they are actually expressing pathological values in society that advocate controlling one's desires instead of expressing them, which is ultimately **unhealthy**.

Nietzsche thinks that philosophers (like Kant and Schopenhauer) who think the correct way to appreciate art is with emotional distance are mistaken and confused, because the artist's great power lies in their ability to stimulate intense emotions. Kant argues that a person can only appreciate the objective beauty in art after they've stripped away anything personally (or subjectively) attractive or interesting to them. But to Nietzsche, Kant merely exposes that he hasn't actually looked at much art at all. In fact, Nietzsche thinks that many philosophers assume that if they distance themselves from their own subjective "perspective"—meaning how things look and feel to *them*—that they'll be able to see something as it really is, "in itself." Nietzsche considers this nonsense, because a person can't see something without seeing it "*from* a perspective," or subjective viewpoint. To Nietzsche, Kant merely expresses a pathological fascination with "objectivity" rather than saying anything useful about artistic contemplation. Nietzsche says that Schopenhauer, who personally feels calm and serene when contemplating art, mistakenly thinks that everyone feels that way every time they experience art. Schopenhauer argues that when a person contemplates art, they become absorbed by its beauty and experience a sense of relief from the relentless feeling of striving (or "willing") that he believes underpins human existence and all reality. Nietzsche agrees that some people can experience a calming sensation when looking at art, but that's only one possible effect out of many. Nietzsche also points out that people can also become completely absorbed by many other things—such as sex or love—but Schopenhauer, who's young, probably has little personal experience in those matters. Effectively, to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer confuses his personal experiences for general ones. Nietzsche argues that people who know about art—like the writer Stendhal—believe that appreciating the beauty in art entails appreciating how emotionally stimulating art can be. Art's very power, to Nietzsche, lies in provoking and stimulating each person's "strong desires, surprises and pleasures, in the realm of beauty," meaning that artists help people understand what they personally find beautiful, stimulating, exciting, and moving. Nietzsche thus argues that people turn to art to feel *more*, not less.

Nietzsche also argues that artists (like Wagner) who use their art to moralize against emotional and bodily desires create bad, simplistic art that reflects a pathological obsession with Christian values like chastity, which are harmful to humanity. Nietzsche believes that great artists, like Hafiz and Goethe, show that the tension between the "animal" and "angel" in man captures one of "life's charms," which makes their art more sophisticated. Wagner, on the other hand, starts using his art to moralize against humanity's "animal" desires as he grows older, thus making his art seem crude and pathological to Nietzsche. Nietzsche argues that Wagner's earlier works, such as *Luther's Wedding*, leverage the medium of opera to explore complex facets of humanity, like having the "courage" to be sensual. However, Wagner's later work, like *Parsifal*, are one-note because he treats opera as a shallow vehicle for his own beliefs in Christian ideals like chastity.

To Nietzsche, artists like Wagner and philosophers like Kant and Schopenhauer merely reflect damaging social attitudes (informed by Christian values) that condemn intense emotional and bodily experiences, which are vital to living a happy life. Nietzsche argues that Wagner simply turns his characters (like Parsifal) into moralizing figures who shun life's vital, intense experiences that bring humans joy—like love, sex, and passion—for Christian values of poverty, chastity, and humility. Kant and Schopenhauer, meanwhile, transfigure the Christian fascination with holding back (from emotional and bodily experiences) into pushing a calm, emotionally distant, "rational" agenda. Such thinkers thus undermine artists' power to do the exact opposite: namely, to show how exciting, stimulating, complex, and joyful life can be. Ultimately, Nietzsche argues that artists and philosophers who try to undermine art's ability to capture, stimulate, and champion complex emotional intensity are doing a disservice to their culture.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SICKNESS AND HEALTH

Nietzsche uses the metaphor of physical "health" to symbolize cultures that encourage humans to thrive, flourish, and experience joy. To Nietzsche, healthy cultures embrace a moral code that acknowledges humans are innately aggressive, adventurous creatures. Such cultures, epitomized by Ancient Greece and Rome, provide outlets (like violent festivities and sports) for people to express and release their aggression and desire for conflict. These cultures also focus on encouraging people to actively pursue their personal interests, to be strong, and to live as fully realized human beings. In describing such cultures as "healthy" rather than merely functional or effective, Nietzsche uses physical health as a tangible representation of emotional and spiritual health, emphasizing the very real benefits that a flourishing culture can have on individuals.

By contrast, Nietzsche uses physical "sickness" to symbolize cultures that make people suffer. Nietzsche thinks that 19th-century European culture—rooted in Christian values that advise people to be kind, patient, humble, and chaste—is a prime example of a sick culture. The prevailing moral code in modern Europe tries to minimize conflict and aggression, and it demonizes these aspects of the human experience. Nietzsche thinks that when people try to repress their inherent aggressive tendencies, they suffer emotionally and spiritually much like a sick person would suffer physically. Under a Christian value system, people either turn their aggression inwards and berate themselves for having aggressive urges, or they become hateful and prejudice toward people who don't restrict themselves. Such behaviors cause unnecessary suffering and inhibit joy. These cultures are thus "sick," because they make people feel worse rather than better.

BAD AIR

Nietzsche uses the metaphor of "bad air"—essentially, the stench of diseased, rotting corpses—to represent 19th-century European culture's stagnant, regressive state. Nietzsche thinks that European culture stunts humanity, because its moral code encourages people to be gentle, passive, and charitable. The moral code also depicts aggressive urges, emotional intensity, bodily desires, and adventurousness as "sinful" or "evil." To Nietzsche, all these supposedly "evil" tendencies are innately human instincts, and they're all the things that connect people with the joys of life—as such, people who suppress their instincts are aren't really living. Thus, according to Nietzsche, people who obey Europe's moral code are essentially corpses who are living a deadened version of life, giving off a stench, or "bad air," that infects the whole of society with a similar sense of emptiness, sickness, and decay.

BEASTS OF PREY

Nietzsche uses the image of a "beast of prey" to symbolize humanity's natural tendency toward strength, aggression, and predatory behavior. He argues that many ancient cultures (including Ancient Greece and Rome) valorized being strong, aggressive, and powerful as "good." To Nietzsche, this makes sense, because human beings are innate predators—meaning we have aggressive instincts and derive satisfaction from exerting power over our prey. In early human history, people lived as nomadic hunters, but as they started to form larger communities, they shifted their aggressive instincts towards conquering territory and establishing societies. In doing so, they inevitably oppress others. Oppressed people in such societies aren't free to be strong, aggressive, and powerful, so they start to demonize their oppressors as barbaric "beasts of prey." In essence, by demonizing humankind's natural instincts, Nietzsche believes that downtrodden people create a standardized view of powerful people as monstrous and morally evil, as symbolized by the inhuman image of a "beast of prey." Nietzsche also uses the metaphor of "beasts of prey" to capture the animal instincts in humanity—the aggressive, predatory aspects of human nature—that modern European culture tries to "tame."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *On the Genealogy of Morals* published in 2014.

Preface Quotes

[U]nder what conditions did man invent for himself those judgements of value, Good and Evil? And what intrinsic value do they possess in themselves? Have they up to the present advanced human welfare, or rather have they harmed our race? Are they a symptom of distress, impoverishment and degeneration of life? Or, conversely do we find in them an expression of the abundant vitality and vigour of life, its courage, its self-confidence, its future?

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

As Nietzsche begins *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he raises several questions. These form the crux of his inquiry and hint at his overall argument: Nietzsche wants to know how popular conceptions of "Good" and "Evil" formed in human history. From this, it's evident that Nietzsche thinks moral codes are a human invention, and he wants to study their use over time in order to see how they've evolved. This task—of looking at the meaning and use of a concept through human history—is called "genealogy," which is why Nietzsche entitles his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

In his subsequent questions, Nietzsche explains the reason why he wants to look at the evolution of human moral values. He wants to assess whether a particular moral code (which determines what's "good" and "evil" in a culture) actually helps people flourish and drives humanity forward with "vitality" and "vigor," or whether it makes people suffer and stunts the growth of humanity. Nietzsche is concerned with the prevailing moral code in his own late 19th-century European culture, which he thinks is rooted in Christian values. As Nietzsche's questions subtly imply, he thinks that his culture is in trouble, because he believes popular moral values that prevail in Europe cause people to suffer. The arguments he lays out in the book's three essays are an attempt to prove this, by answering the questions he lays out here.

❝ Let us express this *new demand*: we need a critique of moral values; *the value of these values is for the first time to be called into question*—and for this purpose it is necessary to know the conditions and circumstances under which these values grew, evolved and changed[.]

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Arthur Schopenhauer , Dr. Paul Ree

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just discussed some other scholars who address morality in their work, and here, he outlines what's different about his approach. Other theorists (such as Ree) agree with Nietzsche that people aren't born with an intrinsic moral code, but instead they absorb their morals from the culture around them. However, most other theorists assume that basic ideas of what's good and bad have been somewhat consistent in human history. They assume that somewhere along the line, people picked up the idea of being selfless and kind and stuck with it, which is why it's so entrenched in our current ideas of morality. Nietzsche thinks it's not enough to just figure out where ideas like being kind came from—he wants to know if assuming that kind behavior is "good" actually makes people better off.

Nietzsche thinks that there's been a dramatic reversal in conceptions of good and bad through the birth of Christianity. To Nietzsche, most things modern Europeans think of as "evil," such as aggression and ambition, weren't actually considered evil in pre-Christian Europe—they were considered "good." He therefore wants to compare pre- and post-Christian moral codes to see which ones serve a culture better. This is what Nietzsche means when he says he's interested in the "value" (usefulness) of "these values" (moral codes). Nietzsche thinks that this is a two-part effort: first, it entails figuring out how different moral codes evolved. Second, it entails figuring out how much joy and suffering each moral code facilitates. The second part of his task is what makes Nietzsche's approach different from other thinkers.

Good and Evil, Good and Bad Quotes

❝ The knightly-aristocratic values rest upon a powerful physical development, a richness and even superabundance of health, together with what is necessary for maintaining life, on war, adventure, the chase, the dance, the journey—on everything, in fact, which involves strong, free and joyous action.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just argued that ancient European cultures had a different moral code than modern European culture. Here, he characterizes the defining elements of what it means to be "good" in a pre-Christian European culture, say, Ancient Greece or Rome. Nietzsche thinks that in a society in which warriors or knights are powerful, the populace will strive to achieve physical strength, material wealth, combat, and adventure. Nietzsche finds this approach to morality constructive for the wellbeing of a culture because he

thinks it encourages people to express—rather than repress—their natural human instincts.

For Nietzsche, ancient humans were nomadic predators, meaning that modern humans have inherited traits such as deriving satisfaction from aggression (from our history as predators who killed prey to survive) and exploration (from our nomadic history). Nietzsche thinks the warrior's or knight's moral code encourages people to live as the fullest expression of what it means to be human, because it embraces both the savage *and* cultured sides of human nature. Later in European history, power shifts to the Church. Nietzsche thinks that priestly moral codes characterize aggression as "evil," which forces people to repress the combative aspects of their natural human instincts, which makes them suffer.

> The slaves' revolt in morality begins when *resentment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values—a resentment experienced by those who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to obtain their satisfaction in imaginary acts of vengeance. While all aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says 'no' *ab initio* to what is 'outside itself,' 'different from itself' and 'not itself;' and this 'no' is its creative act [...] its action is fundamentally a reaction.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Jesus of Nazareth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just described the moral code that prevails in societies like Ancient Greece and Rome, in which warriors are the privileged classes. Now, he describes how a rival morality—specifically, Christian values, or priestly morality, as Nietzsche calls it—emerges from a warrior-based culture. Nietzsche argues that oppressed people in such cultures (like Jesus of Nazareth) feel resentful because they are not free to fight, explore, exert power, and feel joy. As a result, they start to characterize their oppressors as "evil" and reframe "good" to align with their own behavior, which is meek, patient, humble, and obedient.

Nietzsche finds this problematic for several reasons: firstly, the emerging priestly moral code is a product of hatred or resentment. Secondly, it's a reactive moral code: from the outset (*ab initio*), it doesn't focus on helping people realize what they are capable of achieving in life *for themselves*, it merely focuses on judging what *other people* do. Thirdly—and most importantly—it characterizes fundamental aspects of human nature (such as desires for strength, power, and action) as intrinsically evil. This means that such a value system rejects part of what it means to be human, which causes problems down the line as people struggle to make sense of the conflict between their instincts and their moral code.

> What is it precisely which I find intolerable? That which I cannot deal with alone, which makes me choke and faint? Bad air! Bad air! That something foul comes near me; that I must inhale the putrid odour of the entrails of a rotten soul!

Nietzsche uses this metaphor because he believes that the prevailing moral code in modern Europe characterizes aggression and power-seeking behavior as evil. To Nietzsche, however, these are fundamental aspects of human nature inherited by modern people from our ancient ancestors (predators who instinctively derived satisfaction from hunting and killing). He thinks that modern European culture forces people to repress their aggressive instincts, which makes them suffer, and that this suffering prevents them from thriving and experiencing life with joy and stunts humanity. He symbolizes this stultification by imagining that Europe isn't full of healthy, happy people who are actively living as fully realized human beings. Instead, it's full of people who are forced to hold back a part of themselves, so they aren't really living but suffering and dying, and their corpses are giving off "bad air." The metaphor of bad air thus represents humanity's regression or decline in modern Europe.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Jesus of Nazareth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just described the historical prevalence of a warrior-based moral code in ancient societies and the development of a rival moral code among oppressed people in such societies (through the experiences of oppressed people like Jesus of Nazareth). Now, he fast-forwards about 2,000 years to the late 19th-century European culture of

his own time, which has been heavily influenced by Christian morality. Nietzsche uses a controversial metaphor to describe the vibe in European culture in this time: he says it smells like "bad air," meaning the stench that rotting corpses give off.

> *Beyond Good and Evil*—at any rate that is *not* the same as 'Beyond Good and Bad.'

In Ancient Greece and Rome, there's no real concept of evil. A person is "good" if they are free to embrace their human instincts and pursue strength, power, and joy. A person who's not able to do so is simply unlucky: they're not endowed with social privilege, or they've been bewitched by the gods, or they're a bit foolish. In that sense, there's no such thing as a fundamentally evil person, or fundamentally evil behavior. The opposite of being good is more like being less good—or "Bad"—as in worse off. However, when oppressed people develop their rival moral code, they characterize their oppressors as fundamentally evil for being strong, powerful, aggressive, and experiencing joy from such behavior. Thus, the concept of "evil" enters the picture. So, going "Beyond Good and Evil" means going beyond a way of seeing natural, human power-seeking behavior as "evil" in and of itself. This is what Nietzsche longs for in his own culture.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche concludes his first essay by quoting the title of one of his other books that also addresses morality, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here, he uses the title to explain a fundamental difference between ancient European morality (warrior-based moral codes that prevailed in Ancient Greece and Rome) and modern European morality (priestly moral codes that became dominant after the birth of Christianity).

Guilt, Bad Conscience, and Related Matters Quotes

> The breeding of an animal that is *free to make promises*—is not this precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set for itself *in regard to* man? Is not this the essential problem of man?

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche begins his second essay by looking at the importance of making and keeping promises in modern (meaning late 19th-century) European culture. In other words, in order for a person to know that they can keep a promise, they have to have a reliable conception of how they will act in the future, so that they can vouch for their future self when making a promise. To Nietzsche, this a skill that needs to be cultivated in humans. Nietzsche will shortly argue that social customs train people to act consistently in a society, which enables them to keep promises.

To many modern Europeans, this seems like a good skill to have. In fact, it seems like a mark of freedom: a person who has mastered their social training feels "free to make promises" with pride. Nietzsche disagrees—he thinks that social conditioning doesn't help people achieve freedom, nor act out of pride. Rather, it teaches them to limit and control their behavior. To Nietzsche, social conditioning focuses on cultivating a "conscience" (a bad conscience, or a guilty conscience) in people. A person who has a guilty conscience berates themselves for not doing something they should have done. This means that people keep promises because they fear suffering. So, to Nietzsche, a person isn't freer when they can successfully make and keep promises. In fact, they're less free—they're afraid of feeling guilty, so they limit their behavior.

> How much blood and cruelty lies at the foundation of all 'good things!'

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche concludes his section about social conditioning, guilty conscience, and punishment with this quote. Many of Nietzsche's contemporaries consider it a mark of pride and freedom to successfully master social customs like keeping promises. Nietzsche, however, thinks that social conditioning is much more sinister. He argues that

punishment tends to function like compensation in European culture. A person who breaks a promise (the debtor) fails to deliver some satisfaction or benefit to the person who was expecting something from them (the creditor). Punishment entitles the creditor to seek an equal amount of an alternative form of satisfaction—namely, the satisfaction of inflicting pain on the debtor. (Historical customs in Europe would even allow creditors to cut off part of the debtor's body in proportion to their debt). Nietzsche makes two central points in raising this phenomenon.

First, people inherently derive satisfaction from being cruel, meaning inflicting suffering on others or seeing others suffer. To Nietzsche, this is a fact of human nature. Ancient humans were predators, and in order to be able to kill, predators have to derive some satisfaction from the act of killing. Otherwise, they would be horrified by hunting prey and would thus starve to death. Essentially, this tendency is an inherited trait from our hunter ancestors and isn't something to be ashamed of.

Second, many social customs in Europe—such as punishment, justice, and the legal system—are considered marks of a sophisticated and evolved society, but to Nietzsche, they're regressive. Nietzsche actually thinks that such practices agitate our cruel and aggressive instincts rather than calming them. People who have no outlets to release their aggression in healthy ways (say, through aggressive sports and activities) tend to let it build up. They end up directing their aggression towards others and seeking vengeance through vehicles like justice and punishment. To Nietzsche, there's nothing evolved or sophisticated about this picture, which is why he thinks that Europe's social practices (which he sarcastically describes as "good things") are built on a "foundation" of repressed aggression, or "blood and cruelty."

> Enmity, cruelty, the delight in persecution, in attack, destruction, pillage—the turning of all these instincts against their very owners is the origin of the 'bad conscience.'

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just discussed the regressive aspects of public social conditioning mechanisms in modern Europe, particularly the justice system. Now, he shifts his attention to the damaging *psychological* effects of living in European culture in his time. Once again, Nietzsche emphasizes that human beings are hardwired to derive satisfaction from aggressive or cruel (predatory) behavior, because we are—like many other animals in nature—predators.

Modern European culture, however, depicts aggression as "evil" and aims to minimize conflict, which makes people want to rid themselves of aggressive thoughts and behaviors. Nietzsche thinks that people who try to erase their aggressive tendencies actually only repress or internalize them. He argues that when a person feels guilty, they turn their aggression inwards and direct it at themselves. In other words, they make themselves the target of their aggression, and berate, torture, persecute, or attack their own inherent animalistic instincts. This, of course, makes them suffer. In addition, feeling guilty won't make aggressive instincts go away, as they're simply part of being human—so people will continue to persecute themselves and suffer. This, to Nietzsche, makes people inherently miserable and stunts their potential as human beings, which is why he thinks that European culture leaves humanity worse off.

> Indebtedness to God: this thought becomes his instrument of torture.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche spends the final sections of his "Second Essay" talking about the psychological effects of religion—specifically, the Christian notion of God—on a person's wellbeing. Nietzsche has already argued that people suffer tremendously in European culture, because the Christian moral code advocates patience, humility, kindness, and love but demonizes aggression as sinful. To Nietzsche, aggression is a natural human instinct that was inherited from our ancestors, who were once predators in the wild. Nietzsche thinks that modern people tend to internalize or repress their predatory instincts, torturing *themselves* (rather than their prey) for having cruel, violent, or aggressive aspects to their character. Nietzsche thinks that Christianity, 19th-century Europe's dominant religion, exacerbates this situation.

Christianity posits a perfectly benevolent God, and thus, Nietzsche thinks that human beings feel woefully inadequate and inherently sinful when comparing themselves to God. People persecute themselves for failing to achieve perfect goodness—in other words, for breaking their promise to be "good"—which makes them feel indebted to God. Of course, to Nietzsche, entertaining "sinful" thoughts or behaviors is inevitable and completely natural, because aggression is a primal human instinct. He therefore argues that the Christian concept of a benevolent God is actually an "instrument of torture": it forces people to torture themselves for being sinful, or, as Nietzsche puts it, for being human.

What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean? Quotes

What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Arthur Schopenhauer , Immanuel Kant , Richard Wagner , Ascetic priest

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche opens his third and final essay with the question he's going to answer throughout the remainder of the book. As he indicates in framing his question, he's focusing on "ascetic ideals": values that advocate maintaining distance from emotional, bodily, and materialistic urges. Nietzsche's concern isn't so much with what ascetic ideals *are*, but what they *mean* for a culture.

Nietzsche aims to show that the ascetic ideal—the idea that distancing oneself from everyday life is meaningful—is pervasive in European culture and that its impact is disastrous for humanity. He's going to show—by looking at intellectual figures like Wagner, Kant, and Schopenhauer, as well as priests, scientists, historians—that ascetic ideals saturate the culture. Such a value system infects all areas of life, including morality, religion, philosophy, art, science, and history. To Nietzsche, their influence stunts intellectual and artistic growth, and it makes people suffer. He thinks that believing in ascetic ideals makes people unnecessarily withdraw from aspects of social life that could bring them joy. Thus, for Nietzsche, ascetic ideals result in suffering, which means trouble for humanity.

At any rate, this should be the case with all mortals who are sound in mind and body, who are far from regarding their delicate balance between 'animal' and 'angel' as necessarily an objection to existence—the brightest and most insightful of them, such as Goethe and Hafiz, have even seen in this another of life's charms. Such 'conflicts' actually make life all the more enticing.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Parsifal , Hafiz , Johann Wolfgang von Goethe , Richard Wagner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche begins his survey of European culture in his time by looking at Wagner's operas. Although Wagner and Nietzsche were close friends for much of Nietzsche's life, they'd fallen out by the time Nietzsche writes *On the Genealogy of Morality*, partly because Nietzsche grew skeptical about Wagner's evolving approach to his compositions. Here, Nietzsche writes that Wagner's turn to religion makes his art much more reductive, which reduces its quality.

Nietzsche thinks that Wagner's earlier work (such as *Luther's Wedding*) is more sophisticated: it plays with the tension between sensual urges and spiritual ones—or the "animal" and the "angel" in man, as do Goethe and Hafiz. To Nietzsche, Wagner's later work takes on religious overtones. For example, Wagner's character Parsifal (in the eponymous opera *Parsifal*) moralizes against desire while searching for the holy grail. Wagner thus starts depicting sensual characters as evil and spiritual characters as good as he grows more religious in his own life, and Nietzsche finds this reductive. Nietzsche believes that most people have to wrestle with sensual *and* spiritual aims in life, and it's the tension between the two that makes life interesting, complex, and worthy of dramatization in the arts. Nietzsche feels that Wagner's religious turn reduces his art to a shallow vehicle for his views, which dumbs down the quality of his work.

He suddenly realized that more could be effected by the novelty of the Schopenhauerian [...] notion of the sovereignty of music, as Schopenhauer understood it; music set apart from and distinguished from all the other arts, music as the independent art-in-itself, not like the other arts, affording images of the phenomenal world, but rather speaking the language of the will itself, straight out of the 'abyss,' as its most personal, original and direct manifestation.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Parsifal , Arthur Schopenhauer , Richard Wagner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is discussing operatic composer Wagner's turn to religious themes in Wagner's later operas like *Parsifal*. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner is influenced by the philosopher Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche outlines Schopenhauer's theory about music in this quote.

Schopenhauer believes that the world is divided into to two domains. First, there is the "phenomenal" world—which is the world as people see it. Schopenhauer thinks that all reality and existence, however, are underscored by a universal, relentless, perpetual, exhausting striving that he calls the "Will." The will is a metaphysical phenomenon: it can't be seen, but it's there, driving everything and giving shape to the world as humans perceive it. To Schopenhauer, music—as an art form—comes the closest to capturing the nature of the Will, because music isn't visual (there's nothing to "see"), but it's always moving forward, like the Will. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner becomes seduced by the idea that he can somehow communicate deep, profound truths about the nature of reality through his music, and Wagner starts using his operas as a vehicle for his religious ideas.

But, as I feared, the contrary was always the case and so, from the very beginning, we get from our philosophers definitions upon which the lack of any refined personal experience squats like a big fat stupid worm, as it does on Kant's famous definition of the beautiful. 'That is beautiful,' says Kant, 'which pleases without interest.'

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Immanuel Kant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just discussed philosopher Schopenhauer's views about music. Nietzsche turns now to German philosopher Kant's views about art, which he summarizes—and rejects—here. Kant believes that in order to see what's beautiful in art, the observer has to subtract anything personally or emotionally appealing and focus on what's left over in a distanced way ("without interest"). Kant means that a person should focus on the structure, form, or shape of the art. Kant thinks that the art's form or composition (and nothing else about it) will trigger a universal sensation of pleasure in every observer's mind. That's what Kant means when he writes "that is beautiful [...] which pleases without interest."

Nietzsche thinks that Kant is obsessed with finding something *objective* about an artwork that *everybody* can agree is beautiful. To Nietzsche, Kant's view betrays an obsession with the ascetic ideal. In other words, Kant thinks that that observing art in *distanced* way is better than getting personally immersed in it. Kant believes that the best way to look at art is to take a step back, take one's emotions and personal desires out of the picture, and then see something that everybody can agree is beautiful. But to Nietzsche, that's just not how people look at art—people are drawn to art that they *do* find personally interesting.

Without interest?! Compare this definition with this other one, made by an 'artist,' an 'observer' truly capable of aesthetic appreciation—by Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Stendhal, Immanuel Kant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just been critiquing the philosopher Kant's views about art. Kant thinks that the correct way to look at art is in an emotionally distanced way ("without interest"). Anything that's personally stimulating in the art, to Kant, is irrelevant. Here, Nietzsche says that the writer Stendhal's

view about art is far superior. Stendhal writes that what's really beautiful about art is that people can look at something they connect with and be moved by it, which makes them feel happy (*une promesse de bonheur* meaning "a promise of happiness"). To Nietzsche, Stendhal captures what's really compelling about art: it can move people, excite them, and stimulate their emotional reactions.

While Kant argues that personal emotions aren't relevant, Nietzsche (using Stendhal's view) argues the opposite: that the power of art lies in its ability to stir people up and *make* them feel something. Kant's idea that emotions are a distraction makes his view line up with ascetic ideals (values that advocate maintaining emotional distance from life). By contrast, Nietzsche thinks that emotional engagement is much more important, both in art and in life.

❝ Schopenhauer has described one effect of the beautiful—the calming of the will—but is this effect the usual one?

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Stendhal, Arthur Schopenhauer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is in the midst of discussing various philosophers' views about the arts. Nietzsche has just dismissed Kant's view that people should look at art in an emotionally distanced way. Now, Nietzsche looks at Schopenhauer's view, which he similarly wants to dismiss. Schopenhauer believes that all reality is underpinned by a universal, relentless striving sensation that he calls the "will." To Schopenhauer, the will is a metaphysical phenomenon, meaning it's the basis of reality and it gives shape to the world as humans experience it. Schopenhauer is a pessimist, because he feels that this perpetual striving sensation fills life with angst: there's a constant tugging feeling urging people onward that's never satisfied. It never rests or stops, and this makes the experience of life miserable.

However, Schopenhauer thinks that there is one silver lining to this grim existence: he believes that when a person looks at art, they can become absorbed in it and momentarily feel a sense of stillness. This allows people to take a break from the angsty, tugging feeling that exists everywhere else, or, as Nietzsche puts it, "the calming of the will." But Nietzsche completely disagrees with Schopenhauer—he thinks that Schopenhauer mistakes his personal experience for a general one. Schopenhauer finds art soothing and calming, but many people feel the opposite when they look at art: they find it stimulating and exciting. This, to Nietzsche is the essence of contemplating art: becoming more in touch with one's emotions and with the human experience, rather than detached from these aspects of life.

❝ Every animal [...] strives instinctively after the most favourable conditions: those under which it can exert its full strength, and experience its greatest feeling of power; every animal also instinctively abhors (and with an acute sense 'surpassing all reason') any kind of disruption or hindrance which obstructs or could obstruct his path to this optimum (it is not his way to 'happiness' of which I speak, but his path to power, to action, the most powerful action, and in point of fact in many cases his way to misery).

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Immanuel Kant , Arthur Schopenhauer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is concluding his discussion about art. He has just dismissed both Kant and Schopenhauer's views, which respectively emphasize emotionally distant or emotionally calming aspects of the experience. Nietzsche has already disagreed with both of them because he thinks many people are drawn to art's emotionally engaging and stimulating aspects.

Extending from Kant and Schopenhauer to philosophers in general, here Nietzsche argues that philosophers mistakenly think a distanced approach to life is objectively better than a subjective, emotionally engaged approach. Such philosophers assume that they gain an intellectual advantage from being distanced, but to Nietzsche, it's more like philosophers personally find emotional distancing empowering. Philosophers like to step back and think, so they tend to depict anything that draws a person into life (such as romance or sex) as distracting and trivial. Their distanced attitude is a way to maintain power and control over their urges, so that they can devote their time to thinking, which makes them happy. Nietzsche's point is that there's nothing neutral or objective about this approach. Just like everybody else in life, philosophers are enamored

with an instinctive desire to feel powerful, which makes them experience joy. Maintaining emotional distance from life is what makes *them* feel powerful (they effectively exert their *power* to think instead of feel) and this gives them joy.

To Nietzsche, the underlying mechanism that motivates philosophers is the same urge to feel powerful that defines human nature. It also means that although philosophers feel powerful by controlling their emotions (because they like to think), other people might not feel this way. Some people might experience power (and therefore joy) by leaning into their emotions, for example, so the philosophers are wrong to assume that maintaining emotional distance from life is beneficial for everyone.

> We know the three great catch-words of the ascetic ideal: poverty, humility chastity; and if we look closely at the lives of all the great productive, creative intellects, we will find these present again and again, in some measure.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Immanuel Kant , Arthur Schopenhauer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has just looked at European art and philosophy (especially the intellectual views of Kant and Schopenhauer). He's about to shift to other aspects of European culture and pauses here to explicitly connect the ascetic ideal with Christian religious views. In general, ascetic ideals are values that endorse stepping back from emotional, bodily, and materialistic urges in life. To Nietzsche, the ascetic approach to life is most evident in Christian doctrine. He thinks the mantra of "poverty, humility, chastity," encapsulates the ascetic ideal. A person who champions poverty shuns materialistic desires like wealth. A person who believes in humility shuns fame, ego, and emotional gratification. A person who advocates chastity shuns bodily and sensual desire. To Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is thus most tangibly realized in European culture in the Christian motto of "poverty, humility, chastity."

Nietzsche argues that scholars in Europe are also skeptical of emotional, sensual, and materialistic aspects of life, and so they tend to depict these as inferior or primitive ways of engaging with the world. The Christian motivation is to deny such urges for religious reasons. The scholarly motivation, however, is to delegitimize these aspects of life for intellectual reasons. For Nietzsche, any kind of withdrawal from emotional, sensual, and material desires is problematic, so he thinks that both camps are wrong.

> There is *only* a seeing from a perspective, *only* a 'knowing' from a perspective, and the more emotions we express concerning a thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we train on the same thing, the *more* complete will be our 'idea' of that thing, our 'objectivity.'

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Immanuel Kant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is discussing intellectual scholarship in Europe. According to Nietzsche, most philosophers assume that stepping back from life and looking at it from a distance will give them a more objective vantage point, which will enable them to say general or universal things. Nietzsche thinks that this is a mistake—he argues that it's impossible to step out of one's own perspective. Even in stepping back, philosophers are still seeing things *from* their point of view. So to Nietzsche, it's nonsensical to think that stepping back or distancing oneself from life's messy bits (or trying to eliminate those aspects) somehow makes scholars more objective.

To Nietzsche, the only way to learn more about life—or reality, or the world—is to learn about all the different ways of looking at it. Some perspectives will be distanced (as scholars advocate), but others will be entrenched in all the messiness. Similarly, some perspectives (like those of philosophers) will be rational and analytical, but other perspectives will be emotional and sensual. Nietzsche thus believes that the best way to gain an intellectual advantage is to see things from multiple points of view—not just the distanced, rational, philosophical perspective—since a singular perspective skews the analysis and needs to be counterbalanced.

> Look into the background of every family, of every institution, of every community; you will see everywhere the struggle of the sick against the healthy[.]

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is discussing the state of European culture as a whole, and he invokes the metaphors of sickness and health to describe the population of Europe. For Nietzsche, a "sick" person (or culture) experiences life in a way that makes them feel worse. A "healthy" person (or culture), in contrast, experiences life in a way that enhances their wellbeing. Nietzsche thinks that most people in Europe are "sick," and that the culture is therefore "sick" overall. Nietzsche argues that the prevailing moral code in 19th-century Europe tries to distance people from their animal urges. He thinks the culture generally rejects instincts that feel aggressive, emotionally intense, sexual, or power-hungry as primitive and uncivilized.

The problem is that these instincts are all part of the human condition—in fact, to Nietzsche, they're the parts of life that yield profound joy. A culture that distances people from joy-bringing aspects of life thus makes its populace suffer. This is especially true since most people *do* have such instincts, but they feel a conflict between their inner urges and the social codes of their culture, which makes them suffer even more. Overall, Nietzsche thinks that European culture's dominant values leave humanity worse off, which makes the culture "sick." "Healthy" cultures, in contrast, make no attempt to question primal human instincts and focus on celebrating them, which allows people to live as fully realized human beings who thrive, flourish, and live full, joyous lives.

> 'I suffer: someone is to blame'—all sick sheep think this. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, says to him, 'Quite so, my sheep, it must be the fault of someone but you yourself are that someone, you alone are to blame—you yourself are to blame for yourself;' that is bold enough, false enough, but one thing is at least attained thereby, as I have said: resentment is—*diverted*.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Ascetic priest

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche is discussing the role of religion in European culture. His main target is the "ascetic priest," whom he characterizes as anybody who advocates ascetic ideals: holding back from emotional, bodily, and materialistic desires. In a religious context, the Christian priest embodies this role. To Nietzsche, priests tell their followers ("sheep") to strive for humility, chastity, and poverty—priests effectively think that humility is good while being too emotional or egotistical is sinful. Priests also think that chastity is good, while sensual desires are sinful. Finally, they think that poverty (or charity) is good, so materialistic urges are also sinful.

Nietzsche argues that priests tell people to shun their instinctive human desires for emotional gratification, sensual stimulation, and materialistic success, but this makes people suffer (it makes them "sick"). In positioning themselves as leaders, priests experience a feeling of power, which gratifies them and makes *them* feel good. But their advice makes their followers suffer, because people think that having natural human urges is sinful, so they blame themselves and suffer. To Nietzsche, ascetic priests tell people that they will heal suffering, but what they really do is *cause* it.

> The hypnotic sensation of nothingness, the peace of deepest sleep, *anaesthesia* in short—this is regarded by the sufferers and the absolutely depressed as their supreme good[.]

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Ascetic priest

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119-120

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche has spent most of his "Third Essay" discussing why ascetic ideals—which advocate withdrawing from everyday life's ups-and-downs—are problematic because they make people suffer. Here, he acknowledges that there are spiritual leaders in other cultures who actually do use ascetic ideals to reduce their suffering. This means that to

Nietzsche, ascetic ideals aren't bad in themselves, they're just misapplied in a Christian context.

Some spiritual people devote years to training themselves to achieve emotional distance from life. If they succeed, they may well experience a "hypnotic sensation of nothingness"—a mental space that is beyond emotions, and therefore beyond experiences of suffering or joy. But in order to do that, Nietzsche says, a person has to stop caring about everything. Nietzsche thinks Christian priests don't train people to distance themselves from all emotions. They teach people to behave with poverty, chastity, and humility, but they also encourage people to feel passionate about their faith. In this sense, the ascetic priest doesn't move people to a place beyond emotion, and therefore, doesn't do the same thing as spiritual people who can achieve a kind of emotional "anaesthesia" about life.

> No! This 'modern science'—mark this well—is now the best ally for the ascetic ideal, and for the very reason that it is the least conscious, least spontaneous, least known of allies!

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

As Nietzsche approaches the end of his argument, he turns to further intellectual pursuits in Europe, including science and history. Here, he discusses science. Many people assume that science is one place where religious ideas don't hold sway. It might therefore be tempting to think that science is a domain where the ascetic ideal (which advocates withdrawing from emotional, bodily, and materialistic urges) has no sway.

Nietzsche disagrees: even though science takes God out of the picture, scientists still tend to favor a calm, removed attitude to their work. Scientists also generally believe that doing so yields a more objective perspective on the phenomena they analyze. Thus, the clinical approach of science, like philosophy, does embody the ascetic ideal in some sense, at least to Nietzsche. Science thus posits itself as a real rival to religious values, but its reliance on a distanced attitude (on asceticism) is like a secularized version of those values, meaning they still have sway, even in scientific contexts.

> Man will desire *oblivion* rather than not desire *at all*.

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Nietzsche concludes *On the Genealogy of Morals* with this line, wryly summing up the argument he's been making along. Nietzsche has argued that the ascetic ideal—which advocates withdrawing from emotional, bodily, and materialistic aspects of life, or freeing oneself from all personal desires—is pervasive in European culture and that its influence makes people suffer. To Nietzsche, denying feelings, bodily urges, and personal goals is like denying human nature.

In Nietzsche's view, the human experience is driven by desire: the desire to feel things, satisfy urges, seek power, thrive, and experience joy. People uphold the ascetic ideal (or try to suppress their personal urges) because they think that controlling their urges will relieve their suffering. Ss Nietzsche puts it, people "desire *oblivion*" or relief from feeling things at all. This is ironic to Nietzsche, because all along he's been trying to say that "desire" is the foundation of all experience. Even wanting to uphold the ascetic ideal is a desire of sorts. In the end, then, there's no human experience that's free from "desire." Even in *trying* to reject human urges, we're still desiring something—and this, to Nietzsche, is the core of the human experience.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

1. Nietzsche begins by saying we don't really know ourselves. We are enamored with things we can learn intellectually, but we don't pay much attention to our lived experiences. When humans have an experience, we usually notice it afterwards. Sometimes we'll ask ourselves, what did I just experience? But in the moment, the nature of "being" is elusive.

Nietzsche introduces the idea that he will question many things about human nature that most people assume to be true. Here, he challenges the assumption that one's intellectuality is more important that one's more primal emotions, implying that it is detrimental to simply acquire knowledge while ignoring the more emotionally nuanced aspects of "being" human.

2. Nietzsche says that this "polemic" is about where our moral prejudices come from, and how they developed historically. He's raised these questions a few times before, and they keep coming up in his mind, so he thinks it's time to look at them more systematically and to understand their roots.

Nietzsche wants to show that moral values have shifted over time so that he can argue that modern conceptions of "good" and "evil" aren't necessarily the right ones for a society to adopt. He notes that his view is a "polemic," meaning it's a bold, radical, and controversial departure from typical assumptions about morality.

3. Ever since Nietzsche was young, he's been skeptical about morality. He wants to know where our understanding of "good and evil" come from. As a teenager, he would connect these ideas with God, but he gave up that idea. He now wants to know how it came to be that humans invented "judgements of value" like "Good and Evil." More importantly, he wants to know if it's worthwhile to have such concepts. Do they improve or harm human welfare? Are they a symptom of human distress or an expression of human flourishing?

Nietzsche implies that he wants the reader—like himself—to eventually question the connection between morality and Christianity. He thinks that Judeo-Christian notions of "good" and "evil" behavior are actually harmful to humankind, as he suggests that such a value system may actually lead to suffering rather than the ideal way of life that many associate with the Christian doctrine.

4. Nietzsche decided to write about morality after reading an 1877 book entitled *The Origin of Moral Sentiments* by Dr. Paul Ree and finding that he disagreed with everything Ree said. He's going to offer what he thinks is a more probable explanation for morality here—even improving upon what he said about it in the past.

Ree and Nietzsche both think that morality is a human invention. However, in The Origin of Moral Sentiments, *Ree assumes that being selfless and kind had evolutionary advantages that became entrenched in emerging ideas of morality. Nietzsche, however, disagrees with Ree—meaning that he likely believes there is some merit to selfishness and that there are more complex reasons for why selflessness has become the moral standard.*

5. Nietzsche's main concern is with the *value* of morality. Schopenhauer also wrote about this. Schopenhauer prized pity, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. Nietzsche thinks the opposite: he believes these values are dangerous for humanity. In fact, Nietzsche thinks that pity is the most damaging thing about European culture. He finds it surprising that his contemporaries value pity so highly, because many philosophers—including Plato, Spinoza, La Rouchefoucald, and Kant—agree that pity is worthless despite disagreeing on many other things.

To Nietzsche, moral values that require people to hold back from living active lives (like self-denial and self-sacrifice) are highly limiting and are therefore problematic. The fact that Nietzsche, along with other renowned philosophers, believe that pity is damaging adds depth to Nietzsche's disagreement with Schopenhauer about selfishness. Rather than blindly praising selflessness and pity as virtues in accordance with Judeo-Christian values, Nietzsche is concerned with how pity realistically functions within the cultural context of modern Europe.

6. When it becomes clear that there's a problem with celebrating pity, it also becomes clear that there might be problems with other moral values, too. Nietzsche thinks we need a way to critique and question moral values, no matter what they are. People typically assume it's better to be a "good man" than an "evil man," but what if the opposite is true? What if there's a hidden "regressive trait" in our notion of "good" that will damage humanity in the future?

Even though certain moral ideals circulate in a culture—such as the idea that it's good to be pitiful—those ideals might not necessarily be good for the culture. Nietzsche sets out to show that many typical "good" behaviors cause more suffering than joy. He wants to motivate people to think counterintuitively about how their moral code might be negatively affecting their lives and their culture.

FIRST ESSAY: GOOD AND EVIL, GOOD AND BAD

1. Nietzsche thinks about how morals come about. British psychologists argue that our moral beliefs accumulate passively over time, like habits. It's embarrassing to acknowledge this, because we prize our abilities to think and choose rather than mindlessly absorb. Nietzsche wonders why British psychologists make such a controversial claim. Do they want to belittle humanity? Are they cynical about idealist thinking? Do they have a vendetta against Christianity or Plato? Are they just drawn to bizarre or paradoxical claims? Perhaps it's a bit of all these things. Nietzsche likes to think it's really because they're brave enough to seek the truth even if the truth seems "repulsive, unchristian and immoral."

When Nietzsche says "British psychologists," he's referring to empiricist thinkers. Empiricists believe that people acquire knowledge (of things like morals) by perceiving the world *around them through their* senses *(sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste). By contrast, idealists or rationalists like Plato are more skeptical about trusting what the senses perceive. They believe that knowledge can only be found within the* mind, *typically through* reasoning. *Nietzsche agrees with the empiricists. He thinks that all the things we know—including moral ideas about what's good and bad—aren't entrenched in our minds but are learned from the society we live in.*

2. Nietzsche applauds British psychologists, but he thinks they've got morality's origin story wrong. They argue that people start to praise selflessness when they benefit from others' selfless acts. After a while, this praise becomes so habitual that everyone does it without necessarily knowing why. Eventually, people assume that selflessness is intrinsically good. However, Nietzsche has a different explanation: he thinks powerful men assume that they're good and that what they *think* is good. These men distance themselves from others, whom they describe as "plebian." Their sense of superiority creates the concepts of themselves as "good" and others as "bad." Nietzsche thinks our tendency to assume that selflessness is intrinsically good grew out of this mechanism and that our "obsession" with it is like a "mental illness."

Nietzsche agrees with British psychologists that moral values aren't intrinsic, eternal ideas buried deep within our minds (because that would mean they're absolute, consistent, and unchangeable). Rather, it's clear to Nietzsche that morals are learned behaviors that evolve over time. But he disagrees with the typical story about what, specifically, shapes our moral ideas. British psychologists think that selfless *behavior has been praised for so long that this practice shaped humanity's idea of being selfless and kind as good. Nietzsche, however, thinks that* powerful *behavior was praised in the past, and that selflessness is merely a guise or a "mental illness" that covers up people's natural tendency toward selfishness.*

3. Moreover, Nietzsche says, it doesn't make sense to assume that people somehow forget that they benefit from selflessness—it's something that people notice every day, all the time. Another theorist, Herbert Spencer, argues that something is "good" if it's proved useful in the past, as this is enough to make us think it's intrinsically valuable. Nietzsche thinks Spencer's view is more believable but still wrong.

Modern European people tend to assume that selflessness just is*—and always has been—good. British psychologists like Spencer, however, argue that selflessness originally became popular at some point in human history because it paid off to live in a society full of selfless people, and that modern people have simply forgotten that fact. But Nietzsche doesn't buy this, and he's going to tell a different story about how selflessness became popularized as "good" behavior.*

4. Nietzsche says he realized he was on the right track when he looked into the etymology of the word "good" in several different languages. They all derive from the idea of an "aristocratic" or "privileged" soul. Similarly, in German, the word for "bad" (*schlecht*) derives from "simple" or "common" man. It wasn't considered bad to be "common" until after the Thirty Years War, when an English theorist named Buckle implied that being "common" was "bad" in his derogatory word "plebian."

Nietzsche looks into the etymology—or historical origins —of the word "good" in several languages in order to see what it used to mean in the past. He finds that the word "good" isn't historically associated with the word "selfless" at all. In fact, in early usage, the word "good" tends to be associated with the word "aristocratic," which references people in high social classes. This supports Nietzsche's claim that conceptions of goodness and selflessness tend to be rooted in power and influence rather than in genuine morality.

5. Nietzsche explores the roots of the word "good" in various languages to show what the "noble" soul specifically considers good about itself. In some cases, "good" captures rich, powerful "owners" or "commanders." Some definitions see these powerful people as "true," in contrast to "lying," "vulgar" men. The Greek word for "plebian" also connotes "cowardice." Latin, Gaelic, and German meanings invoke a racial hierarchy: the Latin word for "vulgar" means "dark-colored" or "black-haired," which is contrasted with "blond" and "Aryan." Similarly, the Gaelic word for "good" means "noble blond," and the German word "gut" means "godlike race." Nietzsche notes that the "black-haired" people targeted here are actually Europe's indigenous people. He wonders if ideas that we privilege now (such as modern democracy) are a terrible reversion to the idea of a master race.

Nietzsche finds that in very early usage, the word "good" means "noble" (high class), and "noble" references people who are powerful. *In the past, people assumed that powerful people were worthy to rule because they were inherently better than ordinary people. In societies where the word "good" contains a racial component, the racial part references incoming conquerors—designating, again, the most* powerful *people who end up ruling a society. This means that historically, a society's most powerful people—whoever they were—determined what was considered "good" and "bad." Nietzsche also suggests that Europe's early Aryan (or "blond") conquerors might have been wrong in their views, meaning the morals and systems (e.g., modern democracy) that Europeans have inherited from them should be questioned.*

6. Nietzsche says that in cultures where the highest class are priests, these priests have political power and also assume that they are psychologically superior. For example, priestly classes align themselves with "clean" and others with "unclean," which resolves into "good" and "bad." Originally, a "clean" person would just be someone who washed frequently and tried to avoid diseases. Among priests, this idea shifts into a code of conduct for their behavior—such as fasting, sexual abstinence, and isolation—but Nietzsche thinks that these are far more harmful practices to humanity. Other things that priests consider "evil," like "pride, revenge, cunning, excess, love, ambition, virtue, illness" can be dangerous, but they also allow humans to be interesting. Nietzsche thinks so-called "evil" men are the ones with real depth.

Historically, being "clean" just meant not being physically dirty or diseased. However, once religious priests take charge, being "clean" or "unclean" takes on a moral dimension. Priests (or monks) believe that they're better—or cleaner—than ordinary people because they refrain from indulging in food, sex, and socializing. When priests are powerful leaders in a society, everybody starts to adopt their beliefs about what's good or bad (or clean and unclean)—but Nietzsche thinks this is a mistake. He argues that the priestly approach to life shuns everything that makes people interesting, hearkening back to his idea from the Preface that modern people tend to live in a detached, intellectual manner rather than tapping into the true nature of "being."

7. It's obvious that when knights or warriors are the nobility, their values oppose priestly notions of what's "good." Knights value physical power, health, "war, adventure, the chase, the dance," which Nietzsche describes as "strong, free, joyous action." Priests develop a hatred of these values, which is historically evident in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Christian tradition evolves from ancient Jews who shift from considering "good" as "aristocratic," "happy," and "loved by the gods" to the opposite. "Wretched […] poor […] weak […] lowly" people become good, and powerful people start to be seen as evil. This is a result of a "slave revolt" against morality. Effectively, the disenfranchised shift the value of good to align with themselves, and evil with their oppressors.

Nietzsche argues that in societies ruled by knights or warriors, completely different ideas of "good" behavior take hold. Warriors value being strong, healthy, aggressive, and adventurous. Conflict and adventure make them feel free and powerful, and this gives them a sense of profound joy. People who are oppressed or enslaved by warriors (such as Judeo-Christians in Ancient Rome) feel resentful that the ruling warriors have so much joy, power, and freedom while they themselves have none. As a result, they come up with a new moral code. They describe their own experiences of being "weak" and "wretched" as "good," and they demonize everything that their oppressors value (like strength and power). Nietzsche calls this a "slave revolt" against the prevailing moral code of warriors and knights. In contrast with the prevailing view of British psychologists, Nietzsche argues that this is actually how selflessness came to be seen as a virtue.

8. The "slave revolt" happens when Jesus of Nazareth comes onto the scene. He represents universal love that provides salvation to the poor and the wretched through sacrifice. Ultimately, he associates the poor and the weak with being blessed. For Nietzsche, the crucifixion of Jesus thus represents a sort of clever revenge on ancient Israel's enemies, who become seduced and corrupted by the crucifixion. When Christianity comes onto the scene, it triggers Europeans to shift away from endorsing the knight-based nobility's view of what's good and toward endorsing priestly values about what's good.

Nietzsche pinpoints the exact point in history when this "slave revolt" against warrior culture happens as the birth of Christianity, through figures like Jesus of Nazareth. To Nietzsche, ancient Jewish culture was more warriorlike, so Christianity sends Europeans down the wrong path. In a twisted sort of irony, he says, the Europeans who once-oppressed ancient Israelites end up adopting Christianity and becoming oppressed by that instead. With the birth of Christianity, a new anti-warrior morality—a "priestly" morality—emerges and takes hold of European culture.

9. Some people—so-called free thinkers, or "democrats"—might say that the birth of these Christian values was the great triumph of the Judaic tradition, and that everything is progressing well with the redemption of the human race from its "masters" because everything is becoming "Christianized." Even those who hate the Church or think its existence is outdated and dispensable still love the morals that it champions—what Nietzsche calls "poison." Nietzsche doesn't agree, but he's staying silent on this issue.

Many people in 19th-century Europe don't think that Christianity takes Europe down the wrong path. In fact, they think it's a progressive improvement that frees the weak and disenfranchised from their oppressive "masters" (warriors). Even Europeans who aren't religious tend to base their ideas about what's good and bad on Christian ideas (like kindness, self-sacrifice, and non-violence). Nietzsche completely disagrees with this picture, likely seeing it as a departure from knightly culture that champions weakness instead of strength.

10. Nietzsche argues that people who are deprived from acting freely feel resentment toward their oppressors. This resentment fuels their creative drive toward formulating new values, centering on characterizing others' actions as evil. In this sense, "slave morality" is a reaction to what others do. "Aristocratic morality," however, grows in the opposite way: it celebrates what powerful people can do themselves, and it interprets the limitations of the less powerful as bad. The aristocratic system is problematic because powerful people (aristocrats) assume that the less privileged are inferior, though they don't know anything about the experiences of such people. They might even enjoy distorting their victims (the less powerful) into "monstrosities."

To Nietzsche, the morality of the oppressed comes from a place of resentment. Oppressed people hate that they can't be as free, powerful, and joyful as the warriors who oppress them. As a result, they depict their oppressors—and everything their oppressors do—as "evil," and they invent a new idea of "good" based on the opposite of whatever warriors do. This new moral code is essentially reactive, *as it develops on the basis of rejecting what* others *do. The warrior (or aristocrat's) moral code, however, is* proactive. *It's based on celebrating what a person can do for themselves: it focuses on maximizing the power and joy that a person can experience through their own actions.*

For example, Ancient Greek nobles distinguish themselves from commoners by emphasizing their sympathy and consideration for the disenfranchised, which grows into a vision of disenfranchised people as "unhappy" or "pitiable." The nobles already feel happy for being "well-born" and can act in pursuit of their happiness. For them, happiness and action are closely intertwined. Among the disenfranchised, happiness is a more passive notion: they can't live confidently, act freely, or express themselves, so they become enamored with patience, self-deprecation, and humility.

Again, Nietzsche shows how modern conceptions of morality are reactive rather than proactive. In Ancient Greek society, people who are born into the highest social class (the nobility) have all the resources they need to freely pursue their lives with joy. By contrasts, it's much harder for the disenfranchised to actively pursue what makes them happy, so underprivileged people shift their attention away from striving for happiness. Such people focus on things that make survival easier, such as patience and humility. Thus, these values, rather than ones that actually bring people joy, come to be depicted as morally good.

When aristocrats feel resentment, they can purge it immediately by acting—out of "rage, love, reverence, gratitude"—and recognize this same freedom in their enemies, whom they honor. In contrast, disenfranchised people, (or the "slaves") have to become cunning to achieve their aims, since they need to get creative in order to craft a vision of enemies as evil.

Nietzsche argues that the nobility—or the most powerful people—in warrior-based cultures don't really have a concept of evil. Warriors think everyone who freely pursues their power and personal joy is good, even their enemies. In warrior-ruled cultures, a person can be less good (as in less free, less powerful, or less lucky) but not intrinsically evil.

11. Less powerful people see aristocrats—the rulers of their society—as enemies and assume they are evil, even though the rulers adhere to conventions like respect, gratitude, pride, loyalty, and friendship. Living like that feels alien to oppressed people. They see their rulers—who impose order on others by conquering them—as murderers, rapists, and torturers, or "**beasts of prey**." Among the disenfranchised, the boldness of the ruling warriors becomes associated with "barbarianism." It feels that way to all who are oppressed by conquerors, so Vikings or Germanic heroes become "blond beasts" in the eyes of the oppressed. Similarly, Japanese, Arabic, and Roman heroes become beasts to the people they conquer.

In warrior-ruled cultures, the nobility (aristocrats) actually have a strong moral code. They value ideals like respect, pride, and friendship in shaping their personal pursuits of power and joy. But oppressed people can only think about their own misery, so they tend to depict the people who cause that misery as intrinsically evil. Disenfranchised people see all the characteristics of privileged people (such as strength, wealth, respect, pride, and loyalty) as fundamentally evil. They depict oppressors as predators, or "beasts" who hunt and "prey" on the weak. To Nietzsche, oppressed people effectively depict bold, powerful, happy warriors as evil, violent barbarians. The oppressed thus create the concept of evil to capture everything their oppressors embody.

Nietzsche believes that most people presume modern civilization's great achievement is in providing a "domesticated" or "tame" version of humanity from the violent **beast of prey**. But Nietzsche thinks this indicates a decline in civilization. He thinks being a "tame" human is intolerably weak and undesirable, yet this ideal is often thought of as the pinnacle of human culture.

Fast-forwarding to late 19th-century Europe, Nietzsche says that most people think European culture is progressive because it's eradicated violent, predatory tendencies from human culture. In other words, Nietzsche's contemporaries think European society has "tamed" humanity by shunning violent and barbaric behavior (captured in the phrase "beasts of prey") and developing a more civilized human culture. Nietzsche completely disagrees, as he views the "tame" beast as pathetic and regressive.


12. Nietzsche finds modern humanity intolerable, like "**bad air**" that emanates from rotten souls. Sometimes, however, he can glimpse a different vision of humanity that's mightier, happier, and more triumphant, in which people live as fully realized beings. For Nietzsche, European civilization's "great peril" is the drift towards egalitarianism. He thinks European civilization is regressing to a more "inoffensive," "mediocre," and Christian version of itself. In the effort to rid one another of our fear of what human beings are capable of, we've also lost our respect for what human beings can be. Nietzsche feels like human civilization has become pointless, and he's tired of it.

Nietzsche thinks that human beings have primal, predatory instincts. Aggression, like it or not, is part of what it means to be human. To Nietzsche, modern European civilization tries to suppress the violent and aggressive aspects of human nature. European leaders even pretend that human beings can be egalitarian—meaning that we can think of every creature as equal instead of instinctively preying on weaker creatures. However, Nietzsche thinks that the quest to depict human beings as "inoffensive" versions of themselves has completely stunted humanity. Nietzsche uses the metaphor of "bad air"—the stink of rotting corpses—to represent the deadened state of modern humanity, in comparison to how alive we would feel if we could express all *aspects of our human nature (including our aggressive tendencies) and thrive by celebrating all that we are capable of being.*

13. Nietzsche looks at the concept of "Good" that emerges among those who resent being oppressed. The downtrodden dislike the strength of their oppressors, so they decide that being nonviolent, harmless, and not retaliating are good. The idea of being "patient" and "meek" gets associated with righteousness. Humans believe they are neutral and free to choose whether to act out of strength or meekness, but this is an illusion. The illusion—of being free to choose our human nature—allows people to think that choosing to be meek is an expression of freedom.

Nietzsche thinks that history's oppressed people created the modern conception of a "good" person using a false picture of human nature. Nietzsche argues that human beings are instinctive predators, meaning we have a primal urge to seek power over weaker creatures (for example, our ancestors hunted prey to eat). Oppressed people, however, believe that humans can choose *to act out of strength and power, or they can choose not to retaliate against their oppressors, and be "patient" and "meek" instead. Such people tell themselves that being humble* expresses *a sort of freedom to choose what kind of person they are. To Nietzsche, such people are actually* suppressing *their freedom, because they silence their instinctive urges to freely pursue power and strength.*

14. Nietzsche imagines someone named Mr. Inquisitive and Foolhardy talking about what's going on among the oppressed. Mr. Inquisitive and Foolhardy hears people whispering that they're proud of being weak. These people think they shouldn't retaliate against the wrongs done to them, but be nonviolent, forgiving, and try to love their enemies. The oppressed seem miserable but they believe they're better off because they'll be rewarded with "bliss." Mr. Inquisitive and Foolhardy struggles to breathe the "**bad air**" that reeks from these lies. Nietzsche wonders how the oppressed make peace with their suffering. Mr. Foolhardy and Inquisitive says that he hears these people talking about getting their "bliss" in the "Kingdom of God." Nietzsche says that he's heard enough.

Nietzsche emphasizes that most behaviors oppressed people valorize—such as being nonviolent, forgiving, and not retaliating—make people suffer, because acting loving and kind all *the time, even to aggressors, goes against our fundamentally predatory human nature. Nietzsche thinks that people justify their suffering by imagining it's good for them (meaning they may feel miserable now, but they believe they'll finally achieve "bliss" or joy in heaven, or "the Kingdom of God"). Nietzsche extends the metaphor of "bad air" to imply that believing in an afterlife with heavenly rewards stunts the human experience: it turns living, acting, thriving people into impotent, dead, rotting corpses that give off a stench, or "bad air," that permeates society as a whole.*

15. Nietzsche feels agitated. He thinks that religious people are "weaklings." They have faith and love in the "Kingdom of God," but in order to get their rewards, they have to figure out how to continue living after death. Nietzsche thinks that many religious concepts are formed out of hatred. Nietzsche looks at the Christian authority Thomas Aquinas, who says (in Latin) that the cruel pleasure of public revenge pale in comparison to the rewards of judgement day, when the mighty—the kings, the athletes, and the magistrates—will burn in flames and darkness.

Nietzsche's agitated rhetoric reflects his belief that the Christian religion is a perverse way for some oppressed people to feel a sense of power. Instead of taking power over their oppressors in real life, such people imagine terrible things happening to their oppressors in the afterlife, with hatred, resentment, and a desire for vindication. To Nietzsche, these are perverse feelings that manifest when people try to stifle their aggressive tendencies. To Nietzsche, religious people repress their aggression, which makes it fester, grow, and morph into something perverse, instead of embracing their aggression, letting it out, and letting it go.

16. Nietzsche says that the battle over moral values can be symbolized by Rome and Judea, when Christianity emerged. The Romans are like the aristocrats who value being strong. The Jews of this time (essentially, early Christians) value being priestly. Which values wins out? Nietzsche says that humanity has been "tamed" by Judaeo-Christian ideals rooted in figures like Jesus of Nazareth. During the Renaissance, Roman ideals resurface again, but the Reformation happens and the restoration of the Church silences them. The battle over values reemerges during the French Revolution and the "instincts of a resentful populace" win out. To Nietzsche, only Napoleon emerges as an outlier. He's the product of a priestly culture (the "inhuman"), yet he wants to champion strength (the "superhuman").

Nietzsche gives a brief sketch of European history, depicting it as a battle between two sets of moral codes. Before Christianity emerged, warrior-based values thrived. To Nietzsche, warrior morality embraces strength, power, conflict, and adventure as good things that allow people to express their human nature and achieve profound joy. Nietzsche thinks this moral code allows people to be their fullest selves, or "superhuman." He argues that the Christian approach to morality, by contrast, advocates acting weak, meek, selfless, and nonviolent all the time. To Nietzsche, this is an "inhuman" way to live because it stifles human nature. He argues that overall, the priestly approach to morality has been more dominant in recent history.

17. Nietzsche asks if the battle over morals is over, and he concludes that it's difficult to say. He thinks going beyond "Good and Evil" isn't the same as going beyond "Good and Bad." Nietzsche notes that thinkers need to study the history of morals further, and they should consider what's revealed about this history through etymology. It's also important to think about how valuable a particular moral perspective is. Obviously, the answer of which morals are better will depend upon what they're valuable *for*—say, living longer, or growing stronger as a species. Nietzsche thinks that philosophers need to figure out the "hierarchy" of moral values.

Nietzsche's ultimate aim in this essay is to show that moral codes are highly malleable, meaning that they can be changed. For example, prevailing attitudes about power-hungry, violent, and aggressive people as "evil" are a relatively recent phenomenon. Many aspects of such "evil" behavior were historically considered "good." Back then, people who couldn't express strength and power were simply considered "bad," meaning less good, rather than fundamentally "evil." This example shows that moral values have already changed a lot in the last 2,000 years. Since morals are so changeable, scholars need to think about which moral code is actually better for humanity overall rather than merely accepting which one has become dominant over time.

SECOND ESSAY: GUILT, BAD CONSCIENCE, AND RELATED MATTERS

1. Nietzsche thinks about what's involved in making promises. First, he thinks that forgetfulness works against keeping promises. Nietzsche argues that forgetfulness is an active, useful capacity of the mind. When someone is digesting something they've experienced, forgetfulness blocks other thoughts from entering their consciousness and stops people from becoming mentally overloaded. The opposite of forgetfulness is memory. Memory is also active: it's an active choice to keep vowing something in between making a promise and fulfilling it, no matter what happens in between those two events. To do so, a person has to be able to anticipate the future and have a reliable conception of themselves so that they can vouch for their future self when making a promise.

Nietzsche has just argued that popular beliefs about what's "good" and "evil" are relatively new, can be changed, and were different in the past. Now, he's going to debunk several aspects of 19th-century European culture in similar ways. Nietzsche thinks that many social practices people consider "good"—like keeping promises, implementing justice, and punishing wrongdoers—cause unnecessary suffering, which means that European society is not as progressive as most people think. Having just discussed how moral standards are established over time, it's likely that Nietzsche's discussion of memory and promises will relate to how people make moral commitments.

2. Making promises thus depends upon teaching humans to be reliable and predictable, which happens through customs and social constraints. When people feel like they've mastered social customs and consider themselves free to make and keep promises, they derive a sense of pride and perfection in knowing that they honor their word and are trustworthy. It's almost like feeling proud of being responsible. People call this having a "conscience."

Nietzsche argues that societies use social conditioning to make people commit to their promises. Societies teach people to feel proud for keeping promises and guilty for breaking them, which most people assume is a good habit to acquire. However, given Nietzsche's distaste for blindly accepting social norms, he likely disagrees with this mindset.

3. It's obvious to Nietzsche, however, that such a rosy picture of acquiring a good "conscience" obscures its ugly history. Historically, pain, punishment, and fear were used to make people "conquer" their forgetfulness and keep their promises. Germans—who consider themselves a nation of enlightened, uncruel thinkers—originally employed horrific methods to drum social codes into people's minds, including stoning people, trampling people under horses, and boiling people in oil. With the help of such methods, people were able to remember "five or six 'I will nots'." Nietzsche thinks it's funny how much suffering is at the root of things we now perceive as good.

Nietzsche thinks that societies force people to keep promises using fear-based intimidation tactics. People don't keep promises out of pride—they're just terrified of experiencing violent and painful punishment (like being boiled in oil) if they break their promises. Social conditioning, thus, isn't moral or liberating because it's based upon cruelty and inflicting pain.

4. Nietzsche now wonders how "bad conscience"—essentially, "guilt"—comes into the world. He thinks that many "genealogists" of morals only look at their "modern" experience, which overlooks how the ideas of guilt, retaliation, and obligation are closely related. Punishment was often inflicted out of anger at someone for the injury they caused. Such punishment was framed as inflicting an equivalent amount of pain on the wrongdoer as "compensation" that settled the score. Nietzsche thinks that thinking about punishment this way comes from the notions of "credit" and "debit," which have been entrenched in human history since people first started bartering and trading with one another.

To Nietzsche, many "genealogists" (scholars of the origins, history, and meaning of social practices) underestimate how much cruelty is actually involved in the history of punishment. Historically, people have treated punishment as a way of getting "compensation" when someone breaks a promise. A person who breaks a promise fails to deliver on something, meaning they owe a "debt" equivalent to what they would have delivered.

5. In order to show that a promise is sincere, the promise-maker pledges something important—such as their life, their spouse, or their freedom—and they owe that as a "debt" if they fail to keep their promise. If that happens, the "creditor" has a legal right to humiliate and torture the "debtor"—for example, cutting off a piece of the debtor's body equivalent to the size of the debt. The creditor settles the score by getting the pleasurable satisfaction of exercising their power on the debtor. Effectively, the creditor enjoys feeling like a "master" who is entitled to be cruel.

Punishment effectively gives the "creditor" (the person to whom a promise is made) a legal right to inflict pain on the "debtor" (the person who breaks the promise). Nietzsche argues that if the debtor breaks their promise, the creditor doesn't get to feel the satisfaction of receiving what they were originally promised. Punishment entitles the creditor to experience a different kind of satisfaction instead: the satisfaction of inflicting pain on somebody. It makes them feel powerful, which makes them feel good.

6. Nietzsche wonders why inflicting suffering yields pleasure to humans, and he worries about how this urge surfaces in modern society. Such an idea seems obscene today, but historically, we considered taking pleasure in hurting others to be an accepted human instinct. Royal weddings and public festivals used to include executions as standard, and many aristocratic households typically kept a slave to taunt. Nietzsche knows he's harsh to say that inflicting suffering is good for humans, but it's just a fact of history that humans find punishment "festive."

Nietzsche believes that being cruel (violent, aggressive, and inflicting suffering) is simply part of what it means to be human. Human beings are natural predators who are biologically hardwired to get satisfaction from hunting prey. This is why festivals (like weddings) used to include executions—because witnessing suffering feels inherently "festive" to human beings, even if we don't want to admit that.

7. Nietzsche doesn't reference these examples to be discouraging. Rather, he wants to stress that he thinks humanity was healthier when we weren't so ashamed of our inherent cruelty. Nietzsche believes that shame is what makes people feel disheartened about who we are as human beings. It grows from a "swamp" of harmful conditioning and moralizing that teaches humans to be ashamed of our natural instincts. Historical cultures are very different: for instance, Ancient Greeks believed that even the gods take pleasure in cruelty and human "tragedies" are "festivals" for the gods. Nietzsche says that Ancient Greece was an inherently public society, and that spectacles—including punishment—were simply part and parcel of cultural life in this time.

To Nietzsche, feeling satisfaction from acting aggressively is part of the human survival instinct. Nietzsche thinks that ancient societies acknowledged the fact that human nature involves aggression. They provided public contexts within the culture for violent urges to be expressed and purged through violent sports and festivities. Nietzsche believes that repressing our natural instincts is much worse. Such behavior is going to come out one way or another, so it's better to have a controlled cultural outlet for aggression so that it doesn't fester within us like murky growth in a "swamp."

8. Nietzsche addresses feelings of guilt or personal responsibility. He's noted that such emotions come from notions of credit and debit, commerce, compensation, and calculation, all of which have been part of human culture for so long that it's hard for humans to think otherwise. We tend to evaluate things, and we typically assume that there's some price to pay for everything. Nietzsche thinks this sort of thinking is the root of our concept of justice.

Nietzsche turns to the practice of justice. He aims to show that justice (like punishment) functions in cruel ways in modern society, because it creates a legal context for inflicting pain on people. Nietzsche thinks that rather than being rooted in a sense of true morality, justice is actually centered on collecting debts to society.

9. When communities form, the same mechanism of debit and credit is in play. A person gets protection, peace, and comfort from living in a community, and they pledge to behave a certain way in the community. If they don't, the community (or creditor) will collect the debt in another way. A criminal is simply someone who's broken their promise to their community. When somebody becomes a criminal, they are treated like an enemy: they are despised, treated with animosity, and deprived of rights and protection.

When a person joins a community, they implicitly promise to act in certain ways (for example, they promise not to steal). If the person breaks their promise, they owe a debt to the community. Since the person fails to give the community the benefit or satisfaction of good behavior, the community collects the benefit it's owed in another way: the populace enjoys the satisfaction of seeing the promise-breaker suffer.

10. As a community grows more powerful, the deviant actions of one individual become less threatening to the community's existence and punishment shifts in format. Instead of inflicting pain, the community isolates the criminal until the offence has been "paid off." When a community becomes weakened or threatened, however, harsher punishments resurface. In addition, the more wealth a creditor accumulates, the more it takes for an offence to injure them or their livelihood. This is how the concept of "clemency"—or letting people off—emerges. For Nietzsche, clemency (or mercy) is a privilege of the wealthy.

Nietzsche argues that modern legal systems have milder punishments for rule-breakers. Large, strong, rich societies (like Europe) tend to make criminals suffer by isolating them, so criminals pay their debt in time rather than in physical pain. Modern justice systems may seem more progressive, but to Nietzsche, the underlying mechanism is no different: the populace gets the satisfaction of seeing the law-breaker suffer in some way.

11. Nietzsche thinks that some people—like anarchists and anti-Semites—have problematic notions of justice. They base their concept of justice on prejudice and resentment against others, essentially trying to legitimize vengeance by reframing it as justice and saying it's objective when it's not. Nietzsche would prefer people to center their concept of justice on what humans can do for *themselves*—("active" emotions like ambition and greed), rather than what they want to do *to others* ("reactive" emotions). In fact, Nietzsche thinks that reactive emotions are the most unjust, because even the most reasonable, levelheaded people can lose their composure when they feel animosity toward others.

Society effectively takes revenge on criminals by making them suffer for breaking the rules. Nietzsche worries about justice systems based on making people suffer (or inflicting cruelty). It allows people (for example, anti-Semites) to think they can manipulate the system to make people they hate suffer (for example, with false accusations). Nietzsche thinks that a justice system based on personal empowerment, rather than making others suffer, would be much better.

Nietzsche thinks about the origins of legal systems. Historically, laws are designed to allow people to be active and aggressive but restrict any urges to be vindictive. For Nietzsche, justice is exercised when the strong establish laws to enforce peace and order, offer an impersonal perspective, and therefore steer people away from any personal desire for revenge. Nietzsche thinks that oppressive and exploitative actions aren't wrong in themselves because humans are drawn to power and aggression is simply part of human nature. For Nietzsche, laws only make sense if they don't completely obliterate these human tendencies. He thinks that legal systems aimed at minimizing "conflict" violate human nature and are destructive to humankind.

Nietzsche thinks that people are hardwired to seek power, act aggressively, and exploit others. He believes that the modern European legal system punishes people for acting on such natural instincts, which causes unnecessary suffering. Nietzsche argues that ancient societies acknowledged the aggressive tendencies in humankind and provided other outlets for people to engage in healthy conflict. People in those societies didn't need to rely on the justice system to satisfy that urge.

12. Nietzsche thinks that customs like punishment don't progress logically or necessarily become better over time. In fact, they evolve in a haphazard way: society's dominant people constantly reinterpret and adapt customs for different purposes after they usurp others and seize power. For Nietzsche, genuine progress is not linear, and it entails the "death" of old values and purposes as they're replaced by new ones. This is obvious to Nietzsche, given how much historical customs differ from contemporary attitudes. Nietzsche thinks that all in all, humanity's desire for power is driving force of life— suppressing this urge is harmful. Such suppression only leaves room for reactive action—like vindication and resentment—rather than productive aggression in modern society.

Many of Nietzsche's contemporaries think that societies get more progressive as they modernize, because they improve upon the past. Nietzsche disagrees; when different people seize power (for example, when priests take charge instead of warriors), new customs are put in place based on what behavior the rulers want to encourage in the population. To Nietzsche, a society is only better if the people in power structure the society to encourage flourishing and joy. He thinks that modern European society does the opposite: it denies people the right to be aggressive. Consequently, repressed aggression resurfaces in ways that actually make people suffer more. *For example, when a person can't release their natural aggression, they might subconsciously redirect it toward prejudice and hate, and they can misuse the justice system to persecute the people they are prejudiced against.*

13. Returning to the topic of punishment, Nietzsche argues that some components of punishment are permanent (namely, the pain and spectacle of the act), and other components are fluid (namely, the purpose that the act serves). Nietzsche thinks that in the European society of his time, it's difficult to say exactly what specific purpose punishment is used for. In the past, the various purposes and uses for punishment shifted back and forth in importance, usually with one idea becoming dominant. Nietzsche illustrates that customs are fluid, contrived, and arbitrary by collating a list of possible purposes for punishment.

So far, Nietzsche has argued that morals (like notions of "good" and "bad") can and do shift as societies change. Justice systems similarly shift based on who's in power and what behavior they want to encourage. Now, Nietzsche argues that punishment is similar—it also tends to shift in its aim or purpose, based on what the people in power want to use punishment for. *For Nietzsche, all social customs are fluid—and they always depend on who's in power.*

Nietzsche lists that first, punishment can be used to make the criminal harmless and unable to commit another offense. Second, it can be used as compensation for the injured party. Third, punishment can be used to isolate a disturbance to the peace of society. Fourth, it can be used to incite fear and deter others from acting the way the criminal acted. Fifth, punishment can be used to eliminate elements of society (such as a class or race). Sixth, it can be used to celebrate the defeat of an enemy by humiliating them. Seventh, punishment can be used to correct a criminal's problematic behavior. Eighth, punishment can be used as revenge. Finally, punishment can be used as a weapon against people who disrupt the peace or authority figures a society.

Nietzsche has already focused on how punishment functions when it's intended to collect compensation for a debt. He thinks punishment will function differently if it serves other purposes, and he lists some options here. Nietzsche wants the reader to think about which uses and purposes might be best in their own society, just as he did with moral codes earlier. As before, Nietzsche subtly hints that European society uses customs (like punishment) in ways that cause unnecessary suffering, and he implies that alternative approaches might be better.

14. Nietzsche says that the list goes on. His point is that the most popular purpose for punishment in society might not be the most useful of the options. Nietzsche thinks that punishment is thought to be most useful because it makes the criminal feel guilty or repentant—in theory, it helps them develop a conscience. Yet in reality, the legal system of judiciary procedures and imprisonment doesn't achieve that aim. If anything, it makes criminals aware that powerful people are permitted to do things that they are not: espionage, bribery, entrapment, and all other methods that police and lawyers use to achieve their aims.

People in 19th-century European society tend to think that punishment is useful because it helps criminals develop a moral compass or conscience, which will supposedly make them behave, succeed in life, and achieve happiness in the long run. Nietzsche disagrees; he believes that the modern European legal system only causes pain, which means that it's regressive rather than progressive.

15. Nietzsche says that philosopher Spinoza realizes that criminals facing punishment tend to think reflect that something wrong occurred that fell short of their expectations—not that *they* did something wrong. Punishment just becomes some unfortunate outcome that they have to deal with, like being ill. Nietzsche thinks that punishment is actually used to increase fear and "tame" humans against acting aggressively, but it doesn't make them better. In fact, punishment leaves humankind worse off.

Nietzsche argues that European society's leaders actually use punishment as a tool to scare people into denying their natural aggressive tendencies. People are afraid of being punished and suffering, so they force themselves to suppress their aggressive instincts. To Nietzsche, this suppression is unnatural, so it also causes psychological suffering. It turns out, he argues, that this system makes people suffer whether they break the law or not.

16. Nietzsche thinks that feeling guilty is a **sickness** in humanity. Ancient humans faced a wild world that they explored nomadically; they fought freely and acted without guilt. Modern humans have to adapt to a completely different world: to stay safe in modern society, humans have to perpetually think, evaluate, and calculate. Nietzsche thinks that humans are miserable because modern society doesn't permit us to express our instinctive drives for exploration and violence. Society forces us to suppress these tendencies. To Nietzsche, this is abusive. We can no longer express our violent or cruel human tendencies outwardly, so we internalize them and torture ourselves through guilt instead.

Nietzsche claims that human beings are instinctively aggressive: he argues that ancient humans were nomadic hunters who used violence and exploration to survive. Human beings are natural predators, and predators instinctively derive some satisfaction from aggressive behavior, as they're hardwired to feel good when they exert power over their prey. Modern humans have inherited this trait—it's effectively in our DNA or part of our human nature—but modern European society doesn't allow people to express predatory instincts outwardly. Nietzsche therefore argues that the only place for the aggression to go is inward. Modern humans internalize their aggression, using guilt to make themselves suffer.

17. Nietzsche thinks that this shift doesn't come about organically—it has to be imposed with violence. For instance, Europe's free and wild populace was subjugated by the tyranny of conquerors—the invading "blond beasts"—who arrived and exerted their mastery unexpectedly and unapologetically. The invaders didn't care about ideas like conscience, guilt, responsibility, or consideration—they simply wanted to organize and create society, and so they exerted pressure and forcefully drove out freedom. The instinctive desire for freedom among the populace has resurfaced in a repressed form, since there's no safe place in society for people to freely express their desire for power and violence. Instead, it manifests inwardly and psychology—giving rise to guilt and "bad conscience."

When ancient humans began to form societies, they expressed and applied their violent and exploratory instincts toward the goal of conquest rather than hunting). As societies grow larger and more organized, however, leaders use laws and customs to gradually eliminate spaces where people can act freely. Nietzsche reiterates that eventually, the only place left where a person is "free" to express their instinctive desire for power and aggression is in their own mind. When a person feels guilty, they effectively exert power on themselves instead of something else.

18. This is a difficult truth to acknowledge, but it's important. Conquerors are motivated by a productive desire for freedom (or power, as Nietzsche thinks they are the same thing). The same desire becomes regressive when people unleash it on themselves (to conquer and "tame" their "animal" self). It makes people suffer and hate themselves for having a natural instinct to take pleasure in inflicting violence or cruelty. When people take pleasure in being or self-sacrificing, they're taking pleasure in suppressing their cruel nature, which technically means they're taking pleasure in being cruel to themselves. Nietzsche therefore believes that altruism is really just self-abuse.

Once again, Nietzsche emphasizes that humanity is regressing rather than progressing because modern European society demands that people deny their primal human instincts and suppress their natural urges to be violent, aggressive, and power-seeking. People who try to deny their aggression only end up redirecting it towards themselves: they try to wield power and control over the violent "animal" within. Unlike hunting or conquering, this is a futile effort: our natural instincts can't be erased. Modern society thus conditions people to perpetually torture themselves, which leaves humanity worse off than in the past.

19. Nietzsche argues that early tribal people considered themselves in debt to previous generations for founding the clan and keeping it going. Usually, this debt was paid back with sacrifices, festivals, and obedience to historical customs. Sometimes, the repayment was more violent and fear-driven, such as human sacrifice. Over time, the idea of paying tribute to the ancestors' spirits morphed into paying tribute to vague and mysterious forces, which gave rise to belief in deities that people fear and feel they must obey. Nietzsche thinks that aristocratic people pay their debts by embodying the skills of their ancestors, and he finds this approach healthier.

Nietzsche now turns to customs involving religion: he thinks that religious customs evolved from tribal customs which were originally intended to honor a community's ancestors rather than deities. Nietzsche argues that aristocratic cultures, or warrior-based societies (like Ancient Greece) honored the spirits of their ancestors by emulating their skills. He believes that approach is much healthier than feeling indebted to one's ancestors or to a god.

20. The idea of being indebted to a deity gets absorbed into society as it expands, even slaves adopt the religions of their masters. Belief in indebtedness grows as the concept of God becomes stronger, and it culminates in the Christian God. Nietzsche thinks that as people start to abandon that belief and become atheists, they free themselves from the feeling of debt.

Nietzsche argues that as societies grow and expand (like Europe has), more and more people adopt the dominant religion and feel indebted to God. Nietzsche believes that this feeling of indebtedness—or religious guilt—causes tremendous suffering, and he's going to illustrate this with the case of Christianity in Europe.

21. Nietzsche argues that when the concept of guilt (or "bad conscience") emerges, people turn their cruelty on themselves, and they start to think that they are so evil that they'll never repay their debts to God. They think their sins are unforgivable, hence the concepts of original sin (the fall from Eden, a sin that mankind can never erase) and hell as eternal punishment. This breeds pessimism and nihilism. At this point, Christianity comes along and says that God (the creditor) pays the debt himself, out of love for his debtor. Nietzsche thinks this idea is ridiculous.

Nietzsche reiterates that modern European society encourages people to feel guilty for feeling aggressive in order to minimize conflict. When people feel guilty, they're effectively berating themselves for having aggressive instincts in a society that doesn't permit that. As Christianity grows more popular, people's feelings of guilt evolve. They start to believe they are evil for having natural violent urges that they can't erase, which makes them feel like life is depressing (pessimistic) and futile (nihilistic).

22. However, the *full* truth that lies behind the evolution of religion is that when humans become "incarcerated" in the prison of society, they have no natural outlet for their violent and cruel instincts, so they turn them inwards on themselves as they try to tame themselves. This self-torture is amped up when a person feels indebted to a God: we start to think our animalistic instincts are sinful, and we suppress them further as we try to be good. In fact, the Christian religion is the perfect instrument for self-torture: since no human can ever be as good as a God, we keep torturing and berating ourselves, satisfying our innate desire to express cruelty with perpetual self-abuse.

Nietzsche again stresses that European society prohibits people from being aggressive, which makes people unleash their aggressive urges in their minds: people make themselves suffer for being naturally aggressive. Nietzsche believes that the Christian religion exacerbates this situation because it posits a perfectly good—loving, selfless, and kind—God. In comparison, people feel more inadequate, which leads to suffering when they inevitably berate themselves for having innate aggression.

23. Nietzsche thinks that the concept of gods can be put to better (or "nobler") use. Ancient Greeks, for example, believed that the gods accept our "animal" instincts, and people were free to express these instincts rather than suppress them. The Ancient Greeks used the concept of deities to alleviate guilt so that they could be psychologically free. In Ancient Greek society, a person could be deemed foolish or stupid (for failing to express themselves), but they never thought of themselves as evil or sinful. In fact, the Ancient Greeks went even further: they assumed that when someone acted foolishly, they were possessed by a god. Any guilt was thus attributed to the gods, leaving humans free to act.

Nietzsche isn't opposed to religious customs altogether, he just thinks—as with morals, legal systems, and punishment—there are better and worse customs to adopt. Once again, he argues that Ancient Greek customs let people feel more joy than modern European customs do. This time, Nietzsche argues that there was no concept of religious guilt (and the suffering that goes with it) in Ancient Greek culture. When somebody failed to be good, they believed the gods had tricked them or put a spell on them—meaning that their failure wasn't their fault, but rather the gods' fault. Thus, they didn't torment themselves by feeling "evil," and they suffered less.

24. Modern humans bear the legacy of being cruel to our naturally animalistic selves. Nietzsche thinks that we've treated our natural instincts unkindly for too long. He wonders what it would take to turn this situation around. We'd have to connect guilt with our unnatural inclinations—namely, our spiritual beliefs. Nietzsche thinks that in order to do that, we'd need to reconnect with our natural instincts through war, which taps into our natural needs for adventure, danger, and violence. The actual savior is someone who can free humanity from the curse of self-torture. Such a person will essentially be an Antichrist, an Anti-nihilist and a "conqueror of god and nothingness."

Nietzsche wonders what it would take to liberate people in his time from all the suffering they experience. He thinks that people need to embrace their primal, predatory instincts and find ways to express them, so that they stop torturing themselves for having natural violent or aggressive urges. Nietzsche suggests that people need to abandon Christianity, and they also need to curb any subsequent nihilistic feelings (feelings of emptiness without religion to make their lives feel meaningful). Nietzsche symbolizes this goal by saying people need to conquer both "God" and "nothingness."

25. Nietzsche thinks he might have gone too far, so he stops himself, concluding that such questions are best left to future generations and that he should remain silent.

Nietzsche knows he's brought up controversial point, so he ends the essay here. However, he acknowledges that there's more work to do on the topic of how to rid European culture of its self-imposed suffering.

THIRD ESSAY: WHAT DO ASCETIC IDEALS MEAN?

1. Nietzsche wonders about the significance of ascetic ideals, which celebrate self-control and holding back from material, emotional, and bodily desires—similar to the way monks live. He thinks that artists either put too little or too much stock in such ideals. Philosophers and scholars use them to privilege the intellect over bodily urges. For women, the ideals give rise to ideas of bodily purity. Priests, however, use ascetic ideals to exert their power. Nietzsche decides to unpack these ideas a bit more fully.

Ascetic ideals, for Nietzsche, are a moral code in which people think it's good to distance oneself from life's everyday aspects. This entails self-control against material gain in society (meaning it's better to be poor), emotional and egotistic urges (meaning it's better to be humble), and bodily desires (meaning its better to be chaste). Effectively, the ascetic ideal upholds the Christian values of poverty, chastity, and humility. However, Nietzsche believes that such a value system enables priests to exert power over others, effectively making the ascetic ideal a hypocritical one.

2. Nietzsche looks at the operatic composer Richard Wagner, who celebrates "chastity" in his later operas. Wagner depicts "chastity" and "sensuality" as opposites—meaning that a person must be one or the other, and chaste people are good while sensual people are evil. In Wagner's earlier piece *Luther's Wedding*, however, the protagonist (Luther) has the "courage" to be sensual. In any case, Nietzsche thinks that there's no reason to pick one or the other. In Goethe and Hafiz's poems, they depict the delicate balance between the "animal" and the "angel" in humans as a charming aspect of life. Nietzsche agrees—he thinks that internal conflicts like these make life more exciting.

Nietzsche begins with artists. He compares his former friend and current rival Richard Wagner's operas to the poetry of German artist Goethe and Persian artist Hafiz. Nietzsche thinks that good art reflects the complex and fascinating nature of life. He likes Goethe and Hafiz because they play with the tension between being sensual ("animal") and being spiritual ("angel"), which makes their art sophisticated, insightful, and interesting. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner's characters used to do this too (like Luther in Luther's Wedding*), but lately, Nietzsche finds that Wagner's work has become reductive: it demonizes sensuality and praises chastity, which makes it overly simplistic.*

3. Nietzsche berates another of Wagner's operatic characters in the opera *Parsifal*. This time, Nietzsche's target is Parsifal, a simple country boy who rejects the sensual advances of flower maidens and seeks the Holy Grail. Nietzsche wishes that Wagner intended to create a parody or satire exposing how perverse the ascetic ideal is, but Wagner didn't. Nietzsche says that when Parsifal is taken seriously, the character hates intellectual and sensual pursuits. Nietzsche is surprised by this, because Wagner used to admire the philosopher Feuerbach, whose motto is "healthy sensuality."

Nietzsche thinks that Wagner has become influenced by the ascetic ideals of chastity, poverty, and humility. As Wagner has gotten older, he's shifted from creating complex, interesting characters (like Luther) to simplistic, moralizing characters (like Parsifal) who reject the dynamism of everyday life to embrace religion. To Nietzsche, this makes Wagner's art reductive and shallow.

4. In Nietzsche's opinion, the best art allows the artist to disappear so that the work can come alive in its own right. Wagner, however, turns his art into a reflection of his own beliefs—specifically, his turn to chastity in old age—which makes his art bad. Nietzsche reasons that this sort of thing tends to happen to artists when they become frustrated of living in the fiction of their creations and want to start experiencing something real for themselves. Nietzsche thinks it's a shame that Wagner's art had to suffer for this. He wishes that Wagner went out on a high note, with art that was more confident and triumphant (rather than repentant) in tone.

For Nietzsche, good art is multifaceted—it creates a world of its own that a person can get lost in. Bad art, on the other hand, is just a shallow front for pushing some personal agenda. Nietzsche effectively believes that Wagner has become so seduced by the ascetic ideal (poverty, chastity, and humility) that he turns his art into a mouthpiece for that message instead of making art that's complex and interesting. As a result, his newer operas are redundant, one-note, and simplistic.

5. Nietzsche decides that when artists address the ascetic ideal in their work, they're really just reflecting the views of society, their patrons, or a particular philosophy. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner was seduced by Schopenhauer's philosophical ideas about music. Wagner used to think of music as an instrument, medium, or means to stage drama. However, Schopenhauer thinks that music captures what he considers the essence of life: a relentless, exhausting, striving will that is the basis of all existence. Wagner thus starts to believe that music communicates the metaphysical (or supernatural) underpinnings of the world, as if it's a telephone call from God, and he begins to work in ascetic ideals into his compositions.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer believes that all reality and human experience is driven by a feeling of relentless striving which he calls the "will." To Schopenhauer, music comes closest to capturing this striving sensation because music isn't cluttered with visual imagery—it just moves forward. Nietzsche thinks that Wagner becomes enamored with this idea, and he starts to believe that his art can communicate unseen, supernatural messages from God. To Nietzsche, this turns Wagner's art into a vehicle for his religious views rather than a medium to explore the complicated dramas of life.

6. Nietzsche turns to the philosopher Kant's views about art. Nietzsche thinks Kant makes a big mistake when he decides that an observer sees something as beautiful by distancing their personal interests, feelings, and desires from the experience. Nietzsche thinks that Kant's lack of experience with art makes him say idiotic things. On the other hand, Stendhal, who's an artist himself, says that beautiful art *makes* people feel things and be interested. Nietzsche agrees with this sentiment—he thinks it's ridiculous to say that people look at nude statues, for instance, without any stirrings of desire.

The German philosopher Kant believes that in order to see real beauty in art, a person has to take everything that's personally appealing out of the equation and focus on what's left over. Kant thinks that people should focus on the structure, form, or shape of the art in an unemotional way. To Nietzsche, Kant has no idea what he's talking about: people shouldn't try to distance themselves from things they feel passionate about when they look at art. Moreover, Nietzsche argues that artists (like Stendhal) typically want *their art to move and excite people. To Nietzsche, this is where art's true power lies. Artists don't want the audience to take all of this emotional context out of the picture so they can focus on the "real" beauty, as there would be nothing important left to take in.*

Nietzsche thinks that Schopenhauer (despite being more in tune with the arts) makes the same mistake as Kant. Schopenhauer thinks that contemplating art silences sexual interest and gives a person a break from desiring, striving, wanting, and willing. Nietzsche says that Schopenhauer was only 26 when he wrote this, so perhaps he was experiencing some youthful angst. Nietzsche agrees that sometimes art can have a calming effect, but more often than not (as Stendhal argues), art is exciting and stimulating. If anything, it sounds like Schopenhauer feels tortured and seeks an escape.

Schopenhauer thinks that all aspects of existence are underpinned by a feeling of relentless striving (the "will"), which is exhausting and depressing. The only place Schopenhauer personally feels relief from this feeling is when he looks at art, which makes him feel calm, relaxed, and still—it seems to silence all the noise. Schopenhauer assumes that all people feel that way when they look at art, but Nietzsche thinks that Schopenhauer is confusing his personal experience with everyone's experience. Nietzsche believes that many people look at art because they find the opposite to be true: they find art thrilling, moving, dramatic, and exciting—not just a calm escape from the world.

7. Nietzsche even suspects that Schopenhauer enjoys raging against sexual desire, as if it's some kind of release for his frustration. In fact, Nietzsche thinks that nearly all philosophers are hostile to sensuality—Schopenhauer just exposes that tendency most visibly. Philosophers also tend to praise the ascetic ideal, which advocates self-control against material or bodily desires. This makes sense to Nietzsche: because philosophers spend their lives thinking, so they tend to delegitimize anything that could be a distraction (such as marriage) or undermine their power to think, and thinking is what makes philosophers happy. Essentially, by appealing to the ascetic ideal, philosophers can legitimize their intellect-focused ways.

Nietzsche thinks that many philosophers wrongly generalize from their personal experience. He believes that philosophers are peculiar people who don't want life to get messy—rather, they want peace and quiet to focus and think about ideas—so they valorize the ascetic ideal (of distancing themselves from emotions, desire, and everyday life). Philosophers enjoy using their intellects in calm, detached, and rational ways, and the ascetic ideal helps them to achieve that, even if it doesn't suit everybody.

8. Such philosophers assume that the ascetic ideal—which champions "poverty, humility, chastity"—is universally virtuous and morally good. Nietzsche emphasizes that philosophers confuse what's good for *them* with what's good for *everyone*. It's obvious, Nietzsche says, that productive intellectual people thrive when they live in "poverty, humility, and chastity." Poverty allows philosophers to avoid distractions like politics and commerce. Humility allows philosophers to observe life from the shadows, or from a distance, which helps them come up with ideas. Finally, chastity avoids distractions like family and relationships. Every intellectual knows how distracting these things can be when they're working on something. There's no real commitment to the ascetic ideal in all this—it's just convenient for them.

Nietzsche uses the case of philosophers to show how the ascetic ideal (of being detached from sensuality, emotions, and material wealth) surfaces in secular contexts. He wants to show that it has a pervasive influence on European culture even when religion isn't in the picture. Philosophers believe they're a different camp to religious thinkers because they value thinking for oneself over believing what religious doctrines say. The problem, for Nietzsche, is that philosophers are enamored with rational, detached, thinking, so they diminish everything that gets in the way of that. In their theories, they tend to discredit emotions as misleading, sensual desire as low or primitive, and materialistic motivations as shallow. To Nietzsche, this shows that philosophers just end up inadvertently pushing the religious agenda—of poverty, chastity, and humility—anyway.

Nietzsche decides to illustrate his point using Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer, through some personal quirk, finds that looking at beautiful art completely absorbs his attention and stimulates his ability to contemplate and think deeply. But there's no reason why "sensual" experiences can't do the same thing—for example, experiencing puberty or a sexual awakening can also trigger deep thoughts. Maybe, Nietzsche speculates, Schopenhauer's sexual urges aren't so much silenced as transformed when he looks at art.

Nietzsche revisits Schopenhauer to emphasize that philosophers tend to generalize from their own experiences. Philosophers often think they're latching onto some objective insight about the world that applies to everybody. They assume, for example, that eliminating sexual distractions or looking at art in calm ways helps people connect with deep and profound insights, so these are fundamentally good practices. But really, they're overlooking all the other ways that life can feel meaningful and profound.

9. Since maintaining a distanced attitude to life helps intellectuals to do their work, they've never been impartial about the ascetic ideal. In fact, Nietzsche thinks that modern life is foolish: we're arrogant and reckless in the way we treat the environment, the idea of God, and ourselves. Everything that we think is good was once bad. We celebrate marriage yet historically considered it possessive. Obeying the law was considered an outrageous infringement on personal freedom. Before customs and morals entered the picture in human history, kind and peaceful behavior was considered dangerous rather than virtuous. Pitying somebody was insulting. For Nietzsche, every step we've taken away from these attitudes has come at a colossal price: mental and physical self-torture.

Philosophers assume that being calm and rational is fundamentally more progressive, moral, and sophisticated than being emotional, sensual, and materialistic (which they find primitive). But Nietzsche disagrees. Many ancient scholars argue that being calm, detached, and isolated is bad, while being actively engaged in communal life and contributing to society is much more moral and virtuous. Nietzsche thinks the historical views are more progressive because they help people live happier lives instead of suffering in the prison of their thoughts. To Nietzsche, this means that despite what philosophers think, European culture has improved on the past—it's gotten worse.

10. Nietzsche thinks that historically, contemplation was considered passive and suspicious. Ancient thinkers—or "intellectual revolutionaries"—had to find a way to justify their radical break with society's preference for proactive, warlike behavior. The ascetic ideal serves intellectuals well, as it justifies the philosophers' tendency to withdraw from society. Philosophers have celebrated living like "ascetic priest[s]" for so long that they really buy into the idea rather than questioning it. Nietzsche wonders what it would take for a revolutionary thinker—one who shuns dominant social attitudes—to emerge today.

Nietzsche also thinks that the philosopher's job is to question the status quo and push people to see things differently from what's already obvious in their culture. In the ancient past, it made sense for scholars to explore the idea of being passive and detached, because people in warrior-based cultures assumed there was no value in being that way. Those scholars were radical in pushing a different agenda. In Nietzsche's view, modern European philosophers fail to do that—they only reinforce what the dominant cultural view already believes. Philosophers think it's good to be detached and intellectual rather than passionate and engaged. The ascetic ideal says exactly the same thing, so there aren't any radical, subversive, or intellectually novel ideas in their work.

11. Nietzsche thinks that the "ascetic priest" is a formidable opponent who finds "his faith" in living a withdrawn life. Acetic priests consider everyday life to be misguided, and they have to enforce this attitude on others to justify their own beliefs. People who emulate this attitude arise throughout history, in every race and in every class. Their self-contradictory lives that are essentially "hostile to life" itself—meaning bodily wellbeing, procreation, and joy. Instead, they derive pleasure from self-imposed deprivation and punishment. This idea is most tangibly realized in Christianity.

For Nietzsche, an "ascetic priest" is someone who endorses the ascetic ideal: they believe in withdrawing from indulgences such as money, sex, food, and socializing. Ascetic priests assume they're silencing their instinctive passions and aggressions, but to Nietzsche, they're just using their instinctive urges to exert power over themselves and control their own behavior. Ascetic priests therefore only fuel the instincts they try to silence, but they do this in a repressed way that's hostile to all the things in life that actually bring joy, such as sexual pleasure, social flourishing, and bodily health. What's more, ascetic priests also demand that other people behave in the same way, because it legitimates their beliefs, which causes even more suffering.

12. To Nietzsche, this "perverse" attitude leads to other perversions, like believing that reality is an illusion. However, Nietzsche thinks that there *is* something valuable in trying to see things from a different perspective. Philosophers strive to see the world in the abstract, over and above the subjective human perspective. They believe in "pure reason," and they try to step outside of messy, emotional, and diverse human experiences. Nietzsche thinks that this is all nonsense—it's impossible for us to see without seeing *from* a perspective. Instead of trying to understand the world from outside the human perspective (which is impossible), philosophers should strive to understand the world from as many different perspectives as possible.

Nietzsche thinks that philosophers are ascetic priests in their own way. Like a religious priest, they isolate themselves and withdraw from society to focus on pure thinking. Philosophers believe that withdrawing helps them see things from a neutral or objective perspective. They assume that they're seeing the real truth because they see the world without all its messiness. But Nietzsche believes that they're just confused—no matter how much a person withdraws, they're still seeing from their point of view. To Nietzsche, living like an aesthetic priest is dangerous: it fuels the belief that withdrawing helps people be objective, when actually, it just takes people away from all the things in life that being joy.

13. Nietzsche revisits the ascetic ideal, which advocates severe withdrawal from material emotional, and bodily aspects of everyday life—or, as Nietzsche puts it, celebrates poverty, humility, and chastity. He says it's not really correct to say that ascetic priests turn their backs on life. In fact, Nietzsche thinks they're motivated by a desire to *preserve* life, but they do it in a perverse, "diseased," or "**sick**" way. Ascetic priests want to escape the pain and fear of facing human mortality. They yearn for a different kind of existence that transcends earthly life. They weaponize the ascetic ideal to exert power over the downtrodden by promising them a different kind of existence in the afterlife.

Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic ideal (thinking it's good to withdraw from everyday life) is problematic because it doesn't work: it makes people suffer rather than helping them feel better about life. Religious (rather than philosophical) ascetic priests feel tormented by their fear of death, so they make themselves believe that withdrawing from life will gain them access to an afterlife, where there'll be no suffering because there's no death. When they push this agenda on others, they're forcibly removing people from all the aspects of real life—like love, friendship, and success—that bring joy. In effect, they make people suffer more.

14. The more normalized this **sickness** becomes in humanity, the more Nietzsche thinks we should appreciate individuals who are "healthy," meaning they have the courage to attack life with vigor. Nietzsche thinks that modern European culture is a threat to humanity, as it's imbued with "sickly" people who deny their actual human instincts, long to be something other than what they are, and therefore hate themselves. This self-contempt makes people vindictive, miserable, and contemptuous for the healthy people among us. These healthy individuals embrace life head on and accept—rather than loathe and deny—their human instincts.

To Nietzsche, societies that encourage people to deny their natural emotional, bodily, and social urges are perverse: they stunt personal growth and make people suffer. Nietzsche uses physical sickness to symbolize the emotional and spiritual sickness these cultures cause, as they push a moral code that makes people feel worse rather than better. By contrast, Nietzsche uses physical health to represent societies with moral codes that encourage people to actively pursue their instinctive desires rather than hold back from being emotional, sensual, and social. "Healthy" cultures allow people to enjoy being fully human, flourish, and feel good.

Nietzsche believes that the "struggle of the **sick** against the healthy" lurks behind all aspects of society: families, institutions, and communities. Sick people suffer patiently and righteously, all the while expressing resentment toward the way "healthy" people approach life. The philosopher Eugen Dühring, an anti-Semitic moralist, is a prime example of the vindictiveness of sickly people who seek revenge on the healthy. Nietzsche thinks it would be a disaster for healthy people, who are mentally and physically fit, to doubt their "right to happiness." He thinks that healthy people should try to stay away from sickly ones instead of healing them. They need to focus on expressing their healthy ways, because they are humanity's only hope.

Nietzsche thinks that 19th-century European culture is "sick"—it tells people that being "good" means denying their natural urges, which makes them suffer. Some people obey this moral code and become sick themselves. Others are "healthy": they go their own way, embrace their desires, and live full, active lives. Nietzsche thinks people who repress their passionate and aggressive urges can't direct that energy towards the "healthy" aim of making their own *lives* better. *They end up using that energy in a "sick" way that makes* other *people's lives* worse. *Repressed passion and aggression come out in perverse ways, as prejudice and hatred against others—like Dühring's anti-Semitism.*

15. While **healthy** people are busy living actively and embracing life, somebody steps in to "make the sick healthy," and the ascetic priest steps in to fill this role. The ascetic priest is accepted as a kind of savior for sick people, even though he himself is sick. He finds his own happiness in exerting power over people who are suffering, like a tyrannical god. Ascetic priests maintain power by sowing discord among other predators and inflicting suffering among the weak, so that they can play the role of the healer. People who suffer need an outlet for their resentment, and the ascetic priest encourages their followers to unleash their resentment on themselves in the form of self-blame.

Nietzsche says that ascetic priests claim to alleviate suffering, but actually, they use people to diminish their own *suffering. An ascetic priest wields power over the disenfranchised by posing as their leader. Feeling powerful is inherently satisfying to human beings, so this cuts into their suffering. Yet the values they praise (poverty, chastity, and humility) stop their followers from satisfying their own innate urges, which only makes them suffer more.*

16. Nietzsche thinks the ascetic priest exploits the suffering of the **sick** by encouraging "self-discipline, self-surveillance, self-mastery" to render them harmless—meaning they cannot usurp the ascetic priest's power. Ascetic priests essentially set up institutions (like "the Church") to collect sick people and create a division between the sick and the healthy. Sick people feel perpetually guilty or sinful, but there's no need for them to manage their pain like that. Healthy people, on the other hand, process their experiences even when they're are difficult to cope with, and then they move on.

Nietzsche thinks that ascetic priests' practices are diabolically clever, because they set up a system that forces people to police their gut instincts and hold back from being aggressive. This means that the ascetic priest's position of power is always secure, and their instinctive satisfaction from being powerful continues. Nietzsche thus finds institutions like "the Church" regressive: they perpetuate suffering and make European culture worse rather than better.

17. Nietzsche thinks that all major religions are combatting a general depressive feeling of apathy. Nietzsche doesn't know why European culture feels like this, but he believes that many religions encourage people to escape this depressive feeling by going into a sort of "hibernation" from life. People effectively abstain from living active lives, and they shun all emotional experiences. This tactic is common in many cultures: Hindus and Buddhists advocate freeing oneself from all desire, wishing, and activity, and retreating into a place that's beyond the suffering triggered by conceptions of "Good and Evil." Virtues like humility therefore aren't valuable in themselves, but valuable because they help people achieve a "hypnotic sensation of nothingness" which numbs their pain.

Nietzsche raises the example of spiritual leaders in other cultures to show that there are ways in which isolation from society can yield enlightenment and reduce suffering—but he doesn't think that's what's going on in Europe. In other cultures, some spiritual leaders spend their lives trying to free themselves from the push-and-pull of everyday life, meaning they no longer judge themselves as "good" or "evil" and retreat into a mental place beyond that kind of thinking at all. To Nietzsche, ascetic priests (meaning Christian leaders who advocate chastity, poverty, and humility) do something completely different, since their moral code is entrenched in thinking about "good" and "evil."

18. Nietzsche thinks that achieving a hypnotic ability to deaden all feelings (including pain) is actually quite rare and requires a great deal of training and effort. Ascetic priests, however, use another tactic. They encourage ceaseless, mindless everyday work, which effectively distracts the sufferer from having time to think about their pain. They also encourage "petty pleasures" but emphasize giving (rather than receiving) pleasure through acts of kindness and charity, captured in the command to "love thy neighbor." Ascetic priests also encourage a sense of community because the feeling of empowerment in being among friends alleviates suffering too. Nietzsche thinks that strong people strive for solitude, while the weak strive for unity.

Nietzsche argues that ascetic priests don't train people to condition their minds *to stop* thinking *in terms of "good" and "evil" so that they can achieve the peaceful sensation of feeling nothing. Rather, ascetic priests only try to control people's* behavior*: they tell people to* act *humble, chaste, and charitable. To Nietzsche, acting this way is somewhat unnatural because it represses natural human (bodily, social, and emotional) urges, which causes suffering. Nietzsche thinks that when religious people are around others who act the same way, they feel a sense of community, which is comforting—but it also masks the fact that they are actually making themselves suffer more in the long run by fighting their natural urges.*

19. Nietzsche thinks that repressing vitality, encouraging mindless work, abstaining from pleasure, and fostering community are relatively innocuous strategies—but he also thinks that ascetic priests employ more harmful techniques. Despite encouraging release from emotions, ascetic priests also agitate people's emotions by encouraging passion for morals, which is hypocritical. "Good" people—especially man German cultural leaders—are so saturated with naïve enthusiasm for morality that they are essentially lying to themselves and encouraging submitting to morality instead of a making oneself strong to deal with suffering.

Here, Nietzsche reinforces his claim that ascetic priests don't train people to calm their minds and achieve a peaceful freedom from the intensity of emotional life. Nietzsche argues that ascetic priests actually encourage people to feel more*, not less, because they want people to be passionate about controlling their behavior. To Nietzsche, this means that people aren't mentally calmed and soothed by Christian religious practices, and people therefore never experience the peace of mind that asceticism (or withdrawal from the messiness of life) promises.*

20. Such people intend to use the ascetic ideal to alleviate emotional pain—but only covers up symptoms rather than providing a cure. Their methods, however, worsen the underlying suffering. Ascetic priests effectively treat the apathy of depression but not depression itself. Nietzsche argues that ascetic priests effectively make people feel relief from their apathy by making them care about redemption, but this actually means that people have to torture themselves (by thinking of themselves as guilty sinners) in order to feel that relief.

Nietzsche emphasizes that religious life makes people feel that their lives have meaning, which also alleviates suffering. But in order to connect with that meaning, people have to feel guilty for having natural urges, bodily desires, aggressive instincts, and emotional passions. People effectively have to believe that their human tendencies are evil in order to care about salvation, and this, once again, makes them suffer.

21. The ascetic priest would say that he has reformed humankind, but to Nietzsche, it looks more like the ascetic priest has harmed humankind by making people weak and repressed. Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic priest's methods trigger nervous breakdowns. He argues that since the Middle Ages, religious people have experienced like chronic depression, hysteria, and moodiness. The "doctrine of sin" is a "moral cult" that makes people emotionally volatile (rather than free from the burden of feelings). To Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is the worst possible path for Europeans' **health**.

Nietzsche argues once again that European culture is making humanity worse, not better. Ascetic priests believe they are cultivating better human beings, but they only force people to repress their natural instincts while riling up passionate feelings about religious behavior. Nietzsche thinks this push-and-pull of suppressing natural passions and encouraging religious ones is disorienting, and it triggers mass hysteria (like witch hunts), which shows how emotionally unstable most people in European culture are.

22. Nietzsche even thinks that the ascetic priest has ruined people's artistic tastes as well as their psychological well-being. He believes that early Christians rejected ancient literature in favor of the of the New Testament, which Nietzsche despises. Ascetic priests also use the New Testament as a weapon against the arts, by characterizing writers like Shakespeare as heathens. To Nietzsche, the Old Testament is completely different. When he reads it, he senses heroism and great men. He feels, however, that the New Testament loses its "Jewish" feel and becomes pedestrian, hysterical, and shallow. Nietzsche concludes that the ascetic ideal is an education in bad taste and bad manners.

Nietzsche continues condemning Christian religious practice by arguing that Christianity undermines other aspects of European culture as well, like the arts. He thinks people who are passionate about poverty, chastity, and humility tend to reject good writing (like Shakespeare's) that focuses on romance, heroism, and the social intricacies of life. Nietzsche's aim is to show that ascetic ideals, or Christian religious values, bleed into all aspects of European culture and make it worse.

23. Nietzsche continues disparaging the ascetic ideal. He thinks it's damaging in many other ways, but already the extent of its devastation on culture is obvious. Nietzsche wonders why there hasn't been more resistance to the ascetic ideal. Many people assume "modern *scientific knowledge*"—which eliminates God from the picture—has displaced the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche, however, thinks that scientific knowledge isn't the ascetic ideal's opposite. Rather, it's the latest incarnation of the ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche now turns to the role of science in European culture. Many people assume that science is the opposite of religion, but Nietzsche thinks that even science embodies the ascetic ideal: it advocates (like philosophy) for detached, objective analysis of life. Once again, Nietzsche sees the ascetic ideal (the idea of detaching from life's emotional, bodily, and social components) lurking behind the scenes. He thinks it's so pervasive in Europe that the whole culture is damaging to humanity.

24. Nietzsche thinks that people who claim to be areligious (such as scientists, atheists, skeptics) try to reject the ascetic ideal. They believe in intellectuality over faith and see themselves to be freethinkers, but they also align themselves the ascetic ideal because they believe in "truth." Nietzsche says that European skeptics always seek to arrive at some truth by thinking, which reinforces the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche thinks scholars need to question the "value of truth" as an intellectual pursuit.

Nietzsche reiterates that even atheists and scientists believe they can discover some deep, abstract "truth" about life by rejecting faith and using their minds to think through life's important questions. He thinks European culture is flooded with people who believe that taking a step back from life (to think, to be religious, or to pursue truth) is useful. As before, Nietzsche is skeptical about any approach that focuses on stepping back from life rather than stepping into it.

25. Nietzsche is doubtful that there's any social practice in European culture that challenges the ascetic ideal or that provides an alternative to it. Nietzsche sarcastically extolls the virtues of Europe's great social practices. He mentions artists (who are too corruptible), scientists (who have to become emotionally detached to do their serious scientific work), philosophers (like Kant, who thinks he's liberated humanity from religious dogma), and agnostics, who doubt everything so much that they might just believe in God after all. All in all, Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic ideal is winning in Europe right now.

Nietzsche argues that all sorts of people think they've stepped away from the limitations of religious thinking. Yet they often endorse Christian values or rely on detaching from life to think. Thus, Nietzsche believes that European culture is saturated with the ascetic ideal. To Nietzsche, withdrawing from the sensual, emotional, and social aspects of life—whether for religion or for intellectual pursuits—cuts people off from experiences that foster actual flourishing and joy, meaning European culture is bad for humanity.

26. Nietzsche turns to historians, to see if they fare any better. He thinks historians don't like acting as judges, and they describe things rather than affirming or denying in gloomy, detached, quiet ways. It doesn't seem to Nietzsche like there's much flourishing going on there. Nietzsche also finds "armchair scholars" who claim to be objective nauseating. He thinks such people are ingenuine—they espouse the wisdom of others in order to appear objective in their thinking. He also hates anti-Semites, who resort to moral posturing. Germans are numbed because they feel superior and listen to too much Wagner. Nietzsche thinks that everywhere in Europe, all he smells is **bad air**.

To drive his point home, Nietzsche describes both historians and amateur thinkers ("armchair scholars") as people who strive to be detached, unemotional, and objective. But Nietzsche thinks that shunning emotional, bodily, and social experiences stunts or deadens the human experience, so he imagines that Europe is full of corpses that give of "bad air," rather than active, thriving human beings.

27. Nietzsche stops himself and says he needs to get back on track. He asks himself where things stand in European culture. Quoting a passage from another of his books, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche concludes that Christian *dogma* is no longer pervasive in Europe, but Christian *morality* still runs rampant. Nietzsche is hopeful that questioning our reliance on truth and objectivity will start to dismantle Christian morality, but he thinks it will take at least 200 years.

Summing up his general argument so far, Nietzsche says that even though Europe is growing more secular (or less dogmatic), the Christian idea of abstinence from emotional, sensual, and social aspects of life is still pervasive. People still believe it's possible to discover truth by stepping back from life and thinking. Nietzsche thinks that European scholars need to start questioning why they think that's so important.

28. Nietzsche concludes that one question plagues humankind, and it's the big one: the meaning of our existence. Nietzsche thinks that the ascetic ideal fills the void for a while—it makes us think that we suffer, but that we do so for a purpose. It gives our lives meaning, and that makes us feel good. Unfortunately, the ascetic ideal has some serious baggage, which is disastrous to humanity. Namely, guilt, hatred of our animalistic instincts, and denial of anything material and sensual. Essentially, the aesthetic ideal encourages *"a wish for oblivion."* In the end, Nietzsche says, a human being will always prefer to "desire oblivion than not desire at all."

In closing, Nietzsche acknowledges that the ascetic ideal (shunning emotional, bodily, and social aspects of experience) is so seductive because it gives life meaning. Either people become religious and believe that they suffer now for heavenly rewards, or they want to become detached to seek objectivity or truth, which seems meaningful. The problem is that when they try to deny their natural urges—all the feelings, sensations, and desires that make us human—they end up hating themselves. Nietzsche concludes with an ironic quip: at its core, the "desire" for detachment is an emotional sensation. It seems, after all, that urges, desires, and feelings are part of everything we do, and that's exactly what makes us human.

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