

Responses to Forster

#1. On Genealogical Relevance for Evaluation of Contemporary Moral Models

In this reply I hope to add an important point to Professor Forster's already excellently insightful exploration of genealogical enquiry and its applicative relation to the evaluation of morality. In the fifth section of his article, "Genealogy and Morality," Forster discusses an important, hallmark question concerning genealogy: we may take genealogy to further our understanding of the contemporary psychological experience of morality, but how is it that a genealogy is able to achieve this? In other words, in what way is the genealogical method a relevant means with which to evaluate psychological experience?

Forster suggests that one common, negative response to this question, namely, the genetic fallacy, is in some ways justified but ultimately misses its mark. This is because the contemporary "categorical imperativ form of modern secular morality" could fall back into an atavistic slavishness at any point (367). Therefore, the problem that a genealogy raises is not one of originary objection but rather one of relapse. Thus, if we follow Forster's previous article in *American Dialectic*, "Genealogy," a genealogical enquiry need not trace a phenomenon to a single origin in order to have explanatory power of its own (*American Dialectic*, Vol. 1, No. 2 [May 2011]: 230-50). I think that this is very much correct, but I want to suggest that there is a bit more to be said here of the relevance of genealogy to psychological evaluation. Specifically, it seems to me that a genealogy is relevant to the contemporary evaluation of morality for an additional reason to that offered in this article. As I have already suggested, I take this reason, as Forster formulates it, to be the perpetual contingency of relapse into an antiquated motivational state. The reason that I offer, in addition to Forster's, is that genealogical relevance can be defended through an understanding of the sort of nonmotivational essentiality of failure that any past moral system can hold for modern morality.

I begin by taking Forster's remark that it is justifiable to say that some genealogies "fail to show that the old motives are *essential* components of our modern morality, and therefore fail to show that

we have any good reason to abandon it” (366). I take it to be correct that old motives necessarily cannot be essential components of the contemporary model if we hope to avoid an originary argument (or pedigree). However, it seems to me that we can make a different sort of claim about essentiality: each stage of morality as outlined in, for example, Nietzsche's genealogy, is immanently due to fail by way of self-contradiction, and the self-contradiction occurs through the nature of content (specific objects of approval and disapproval, following Forster) rather than through a guiding motivation. Therefore, this self-contradiction is not the product of any motive on the part of an adherent. Rather, this self-contradiction has to do with the contents of the system of belief itself.

We should evaluate an example. When the fifth stage of the genealogy, the bad conscience, undermined its own operation and in so doing yielded the sixth stage, the ascetic ideal, the failure did not occur due to the motivation(s) held by those with a bad conscience, but rather due to the failure resulting from the holding of beliefs having to do with bad conscience. The rough distinction, then, is between, on the one hand, *what* is believed, and, on the other, *why* it is believed. Therefore it can be argued that the problem that Nietzsche's genealogy raises is not that one believes in a moral system for bad reasons, but that the moral system that one believes in is only the product of the failure of previous systems. One's motivations, then, may remain, but the particular way in which one follows through with such motivations is the product of the self-contradiction of a previous way of living morally.

Clearly, though, we must be very careful with this present distinction. Here's why: any given moral stage in Nietzsche's genealogy yielded a new stage because of the nature of what was believed, and *not* the nature of the specific motivations for believing. So, for example, a community's motivation to ward off external danger (the first stage of Nietzsche's genealogy) organized a particular “prehistoric” moral system. This system undermined itself when the previously external world became compartmentalized from the community, thereby reconstituting the nature of the internal and external. The encapsulated community became redefined in such a way that a new externality sprouted up: the other people in the community. The reason why one must be careful with the distinction is that it is at least *prima facie* easy to think that the first stage undermined itself because of the motivation for banding together

against outside threats, that is, the desire to continue living free from harm or death, but this is a misguided reading of Nietzsche's genealogy, and it ostensibly falls victim to an objection made in appeal to the genetic fallacy. A more prudent reading, then, is to consider that the first stage undermined itself through a system organized around keeping everyone alive, while remembering that the system did *not* fail merely because people wanted to live.

So, in sum, one additional example of relevance for genealogy to the contemporary understanding of morality is that we understand an essential but nonoriginary component of a moral system to be its self-contradiction through content rather than motivation. Therefore, in evaluating whether or not we should ascribe to the contemporary "categorical imperativ form of modern secular morality", we can perhaps ask ourselves what our motivations are, and then proceed to consider the content of our modern moral system. In considering any moral system, we should determine whether the present system is the product of a preceding system's self-contradiction, and then determine whether the present system is self-contradictory in its own right. Our motivations, I suggest, we may keep to the side.

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