Phil 104, Wednesday, November 3, 2010
Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, II

In section II, Nietzsche looks further back into human history (or rather prehistory), before the slave revolt, to events that lie at the dawn of civilization.

Where does conscience come from?
How did we ever become capable of *conscience*: of evaluating our conduct against some standard of what it *should* be, or *should have* been?

Nietzsche suggests that, to answer this, we should ask: How did we ever become capable of making *promises*? "To breed an animal *with the right to make promises* [elsewhere: "answerable for his own future"]—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?"

Two basic capacities needed to make promises:

1. One must be able to *remember* what one promised. Yet forgetting—*repressing*—is very important to our psychological health. So how was this forgetting inhibited? Through pain: tortures, mutilations, the suffering of one's children, etc.
2. One must be capable of *regular* behavior, of conforming to rules.

Notice that these capacities consist in a kind of power over, or domination of, oneself. Thus, conscience is, from the start, an expression of the will to power.

With these capacities…

- …one has the ability to see one's actual conduct as conforming, or failing to conform, to what it should have been.
- …more particularly, one has the ability to have *debts* to someone (e.g., to the promisee).

Where do "*bad* conscience" and guilt come from?
How, though, did we become liable to *bad* conscience: to *painful, negative* assessments of ourselves and our conduct as not being what it ought to have been?

Again, Nietzsche is impressed by etymology. He notes that the German "*Schuld*" means both "guilt" and "debt."

- The primitive response when someone injures you is simply to vent your anger on him.
- But once the idea of "debtor" and "creditor" has gained currency, then another possibility presents itself. The person who has injured you owes you a "debt" that he must repay.
- And this repayment need not take the form of "literal compensation" such as "money, land, possessions of any kind."
- Instead, the repayment can take the form of submitting to your (the "creditor's") punishment, which compensates you by giving "the pleasure of being allowed to vent [your] power freely upon one who is powerless": the pleasure of feeling, if only for a moment, like a master.
- This is how we come to see the infliction of pain as the fitting response to injury.

So far, you are inflicting pain *on someone else, the person who injured you,* as "payment" of the "debt" that that person owes you. But "bad conscience" involves your inflicting pain *on yourself* as "payment" of the "debt" that *you* owe. Where does *this* idea come from?

- With the advent of civilization, natural drives to aggression and cruelty are repressed.
- Since these drives, especially those of the powerless, cannot find any outward, physical expression, the will to power again takes an inward, psychological form. That is, with no one *else* to dominate, man dominates the only victim he can lay his hands on: *himself*.

  The man who, from lack of external enemies and resistances and forcibly confined to the oppressive narrowness and punctiliousness of custom, impatiently lacerated, persecuted, gnawed at, assaulted, and maltreated himself; this animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage as one tried to 'tame' it; this deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild, who had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness—this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the 'bad conscience' (§16).

- Religion has always involved the expression of feelings of indebtedness, initially toward ancestors, but then later toward gods.
- But, *in principle*, these debts can be repaid. In principle, the gods can be appeased, and in myths they sometimes are. Not that it's easy: the debts usually need to be paid in hardship or blood; when one placates one god, one often risks of pissing off another; one needs a little luck or divine intervention here and there, etc. But there's at least the *hope* that one might settle one's tab, at least for the time being, with the immortals.
- Christianity, however, pushes this idea of indebtedness to the extreme. It devises *a debt to God that can never be payed*—a *permanent* form of guilt, which no amount of punishment could ever possibly expiate.
- Jesus's "redemption" of us, His suffering "for our sins," only makes it worse—and it is *meant* to make it worse. Far from cleansing us of our guilt, it is the ultimate guilt trip.

  "Suddenly we stand before the paradoxical and horrifying expedient that afforded temporary relief for tormented humanity, that stroke of genius on the part of Christianity: God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind, God himself makes payment to himself, God as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself—the creditor sacrifices himself for his debtor, out of *love* (can one credit that?), out of love for his debtor!"

  "In his psychical cruelty there resides a madness of the will which is absolutely unexampled: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for; his *will* to think himself punished without any possibility of the punishment becoming equal to his guilt."

- As we will see in section III, this idea of irredeemable guilt, of our deserving punishment beyond measure, plays another role for us, in addition to giving us someone (namely, ourselves) to dominate. It gives *meaning to our suffering*. As horrible as it is, it at least saves us from viewing our suffering as *pointless*.

Review Question:

1. People sometimes say that when convicts are imprisoned, they are paying their "debt to society." What would Nietzsche make of this expression?