In an essay on Nietzsche Bernard Williams praises what he calls Nietzsche's "realism" in ethics; by which he means not "the application of an already defined scientific programme" but an approach which takes as its measure the outlook of an "experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter." Such "realism," he continues, can be said to involve, in Paul Ricoeur's well-known phrase, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. As such, it cannot compel demonstratively, and does not attempt to do so. It invites one into a perspective, and to some extent a tradition (one marked by such figures as Thucydides, for instance, or Stendhal, or the British psychologists of morals whom Nietzsche described as 'old frogs'), in which what seems to demand more moral material makes sense in terms of what demands less. What I have long found interesting in this remark is the way it triggers, in so few words, a number of disparate, potentially conflicting, perspectives.

In the first place, and at the simplest level, the realism Williams is talking about is simply the ability to clear one’s mind of cant, the ability to see people as they are and not as we wish, hope or require them to be, or want to pretend that they are. The mention of Thucydides and Stendhal suggests as much. Realism in this admirable sense – seeing people, feelings, and practices lucidly, no doubt with the help of whatever empirical findings we have, but not in terms of a fixed moralising perspective or a preconceived explanatory model, is a surprisingly unusual gift, at least among moralists and intellectuals. It is not cynicism. Thucydides does not send up Pericles’ funeral speech, nor does Stendhal mock or diminish Mme de Renal or the compellleness of her dilemma. In both cases the power comes from the writer’s insight into the moral point of view he depicts. Certainly it means being able to see real motives behind protestations when these differ, and understanding how situation exerts pressure not merely on protestation but on real conviction. It also involves seeing how disastrous consequences can flow from morally understandable stances. It does not, however, deny morality, in either of the two ways that Nietzsche distinguishes in that well-known passage from Daybreak that is on the handout.

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1 Williams 1995, p. 68; Cp Williams 1995a, p. 204.
2 "There are two kinds of deniers of morality. - 'To deny morality' - this can mean, first: to deny that the moral motives which men claim have inspired their actions really have done so - it is thus the assertion that morality consists of words and is among the coarser or more subtle deceptions (especially self-deceptions) which most men practise. and is perhaps so especially in precisely the case of those most famed for virtue. Then it can mean, to deny that moral judgements are based on truths. Here
Realism sees that in human action moral elements are almost always mixed in with others, and that genuinely moral motives are by no means always admirable, while non-moral ones may be. It does not sit easily with optimistic rhetoric or political uplift yet it recognises heroism as well as evil – the heights that human beings can rise to, as well as the depths to which they can fall. No doubt it also recognises the mediocrity of the general and normal human level. It’s like a sharp, bitter but invigorating drink.

However, when Williams refers to the British psychologists of morals, and talks about theoretical perspectives “in which what seems to demand more moral material makes sense in terms of what demands less”, we move into different territory. It is the territory of ‘internal and external reasons’, of reason as a slave of the passions, of theories that seek to show that the moral sentiments really are, or are reducible to, non-moral sentiments, such as anger, resentment or fear. To call this realism, and to relate it to the realism of Thucydides and Stendhal, is tendentious. On the contrary, I would say that it involves “the application of an already defined scientific programme,” and a dogmatic one at that, one which multiplies ad hoc hypotheses in the face of the facts. I don’t say that this holds of all the British moral psychologists. One can exempt Adam Smith from this, or Shaftesbury or Butler (if any of these can be counted as old frogs) but not Hume or Williams.

And then, thirdly, we have Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which takes us into different territory again – the territory of subversive 20th century modernism as against complacent 18th century glibness. Suspicion is clearly a prime theme in the modernist thought-world, for all that other major themes clash with it. Moreover, among modernist ‘narratives’ it is par excellence the one that postmodernism selects, magnifies, democratises and coarsens. But just as the first kind of realism, that of Thucydides and Stendhal, can ask what motives lie behind the simplicities of enlightenment moral psychology, so it can ask what motives lie behind the "hermeneutics of suspicion." Realism in this true sense can certainly ask whether modernist suspicion is another way of weaving self-flattering myths, a way of achieving salvific ‘knowledge’ and ‘liberation’ from the humdrum necessities of the bourgeois world. [[You may be an exploited cog in a bureaucratic workplace, but at least you know that 9/11 never took place.]]

it is admitted that they really are motives of action, but that in this way it is errors which, as the basis of all moral judgement, impel men to their actions. This is my point of view: though I should be the last to deny that in very many cases there is some ground for suspicion that the other point of view - that is to say, the point of view of La Rochefoucauld and others who think like him - may also be justified and in any event of great general application. - Thus I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises: but I do not deny that their have been alchemists who have believed in these premises and acted in accordance with them. - I also deny immorality: not that countless people feel themselves to be immoral, but that there is any true reason so to feel. It goes without saying that I do not deny - unless I am a fool - that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged - but I think that the one should be encouraged and the other avoided for other reasons than hitherto. We have to learn to think differently - in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.” Daybreak, §103
II

How does Nietzsche relate to these three disparate strands that seem to be evoked in Williams’ description of “realism”?

He was certainly capable of the realism of Thucydides and Stendhal. It shines through intermittently and unpredictably, as though from a malfunctioning lighthouse. Nietzsche’s power of lucid human insight is a main source of his work’s value as literature – its presence helps to explain what makes both it and him so moving. Note that this kind of realism about people is by its very nature capable of love and reverence for truth and virtue, just as it is very quick to see its lack. Reverence and truthfulness are part of Nietzsche’s own aristocratic scale of values. Alas, his vision of a disastrous modernity grips him, isolates him, and makes it impossible for him to dwell in these virtues and be warmed by them. Thomas Mann describes Nietzsche as a delicate, fine, warmhearted soul in need of love, formed for noble friendships and not all made for solitude. And upon this soul deepest, coldest solitude, the solitude of the criminal, was imposed. Here was a mind by origin profoundly respectful, shaped to revere pious traditions; and just such a mind fate chose to drag by the hair, as it were, into a posture of wild and drunken truculence, of rebellion against all reverence. This mind was compelled to violate its own nature, to become the mouthpiece and advocate of blatant force, of the callous conscience, of Evil itself. ‘Nietzsche’s Philosophy in the Light of Recent History’ (1947), Last Essays, p. 142

Mann says that his own attitude to Nietzsche had always been “a combination of reverence and pity.” His description of Nietzsche, and his attitude towards him, seem to be right. Except that it was not fate that dragged Nietzsche into truculence and solitude; it was his diagnosis of what had wrong with the world, and his prophetic, personally agonising, vision of what was needed to set it to rights. I shall come back a number of times to Mann’s great essay. [But where does he get his quotes?]

Does Nietzsche’s diagnosis of morality enable us to group him with either the enlightenment old frogs, or the modern masters of suspicion? We can do both, but either way the result is inadequate. The British moral psychologists sought an account of moral ideas and emotions that was not only anti-rationalist but also reductive – and so, in a way, does Nietzsche. Their interest is naturalistic, explanatory, and so, up to a point, though only up to a point, is Nietzsche’s. But – an immensely important but – they took it for granted that morality is a universal, inevitable, human phenomenon. They assumed that the sentiments in which it was grounded were universal and ineradicable, and that their understanding of these sentiments and their superstructure would leave it in place. Nietzsche thinks neither of these things. He thinks morality – i.e. the value-system that deals in good and evil, blame and guilt, conscience, remorse and atonement – is a historical product, and, apparently, that to analyse its origins is to undermine it. Or at least that it would be, if it wasn’t so busy undermining itself, through the working-out of its own values of asceticism, equality, and scientific truth.

What about the hermeneutics of suspicion? It is familiar and justified to place Nietzsche among its masters, along with Marx and Freud. But here again this only takes us so far; to leave it there would be highly misleading. There is a vast difference in the overall picture. Marx and Freud – along with Humboldt and Mill, come to that – want to liberate us from bourgeois morality for the sake of a humanist ideal. It is an ideal of the self-realised individual, in full and serene possession of his or her own powers, in its origins romantic-hellenic or Schillerian. It may have a socialist or a liberal setting but it crucially envisages the free self-development of all. Moralities,
though relatively autonomous in their content, are still shaped by some reflective ethos or ideal, and the ideal of human beings as the highest, the free and equal, shapes morality as it has come down to us. It is the ethos of late-modern, post-Christian, morality, and it is there in Mill, Marx and Freud. They differ in their accounts of what is needed to liberate humanity, but they differ far less in their ideal of what a liberated human being would be. But this Schillerian ideal is not Nietzsche’s ideal. (In *Twilight of the Idols* Schiller appears as “the Moral-Trumpeter of Säckingen.”) Schiller, Mill, Marx, Freud and the rest were humanists liberating human beings from one or another aspect of bourgeois oppression. Nietzsche also hates the bourgeois, but much more importantly, he is against humanism as such. Humanism, in its liberal and socialist versions, is simply the continuation of Christianity without God. Humanity itself is the problem: he wants to go beyond it, a new higher species. Here he is in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Christianity has been the most fatal kind of self-presumption ever. Men not high or hard enough for the artistic refashioning of mankind; men not strong or farsighted enough for the sublime self-constraint needed to allow the foreground law of thousandfold failure and perishing to prevail; men not noble enough to see the abysmal disparity of rank and abyss of rank between men [?] and man – it is such men who, with their ‘equal before God’, have hitherto ruled over the destiny of Europe, until at last a shrunken, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something full of good will, sickly and mediocre has been bred, the European of today … §62, p. 89

From the Nietzschean point of view, Marx and Freud remain moralists, not immoralists. They may criticise some aspects of bourgeois morality, be it individual rights, or the repression of sex. Perhaps they even want to go beyond guilt and blame. But they retain the essential ethos of modern morality; the ‘equal before God’, even though God has died.

Let me quote again from Mann. “We may say”, he writes that Nietzsche’s relationship to the preferred objects of his criticism was simply one of passion – a passion without a specific sign, for it was constantly shifting between the positive and the negative. 150

He means that Nietzsche hated what he loved and venerated, and tried to love what he hated. That applies par excellence to Christianity and to his vision of what must replace it. Mann quotes a letter to Peter Gast, in which Nietzsche says that Christianity represented the finest ideal he had ever known, and says that he had “never been, in his heart, insulting to Christianity.” He juxtaposes that with another description of Christianity as “the one immortal blot of shame upon the escutcheon of humanity” (149). [but where does he get these quotes from?]

III

Nietzsche may have felt similarly passionate, positively and negatively, about Schiller. Nonetheless, if anything is clear about Nietzsche it is his utter contempt for, and also fear of, that humanist ethos that does without God but elevates human beings to free and equal gods. He is an immoralist and anti-humanist; he thinks morality itself, and post-Christian humanism, are the fatal legacy of Judaeo-Christian slave culture. So now I want to consider these two separable themes: his denial of moral distinctions, and his assault on the humanist ideal.
I want to argue that Nietzsche’s first theme, the rejection of morality, is not just a failure but totally misconceived, while on the other hand his anti-humanism, his assault on the *ethos* of post-Christian morality is disconcertingly powerful. To some extent, I guess, this may be the opposite of some currently popular estimates of what he achieved. However it isn’t particularly original. It is in essentials the same estimate as that made by Thomas Mann. A Catholic friend of mine told me that he sees the *Genealogy of Morals* as a kind of spiritual exercise; that is, I presume, as something that one reads, deeply reflects on, and tries to find the strength and faith to overcome. I confess that in some moments I feel a bit like that about Nietzsche’s anti-humanism.

But let’s first consider the rejection of morality. Certainly Nietzsche is an error theorist about morality – Williams’s ‘morality system’. Apart from the passage in *Daybreak* 103, there are many others. *(I’ve put one of them, from *Twilight of the Idols*, on the handout.)*

Now since error theory has become established as a standard option in current meta-ethics, this has provided N with an entrée into current discussions in analytic philosophy, in that peculiar and half-accidental way in which an idea of one of the great old philosophers gets wrenched out of its context when current philosophical discussion becomes, for a period, interested in it.

But the connection with current meta-ethics could easily mislead. I don’t think Nietzsche was an error theorist on the sort of epistemological and metaphysical grounds familiar from Mackie. Whatever we make of N’s mysterious perspectivist pronouncements, he doesn’t deploy these against morality as such. True, he deploys them against the allegedly ascetic ideal of objective truth – but then he also thinks that it is this ideal that ends by undermining morality itself. Thus, while he may think that this ideal of truth leads to the conclusion that moral judgements are errors, he cannot himself be endorsing the premise of that particular argument. Furthermore he wants to replace morality by another set of values. How should we reconcile the assertion of these values with his perspectivism? It seems that however we do so we could reconcile positive moral claims in the same way. Nietzsche can’t have thought that his arguments against morality would be good against all valuation. Perhaps he thinks that moral judgement in particular presupposes the existence of moral facts, in a way that other value judgements do not presuppose the existence of value facts. At any rate, his hostility to morality cannot be derived from his meta-views about objectivity as such.

Nor does it help to see him arguing against morality by means of an incompatibilist argument against free will. True, he thinks free will is a fiction. But he thinks many other things are fictions. In itself, that is not necessarily a destructive criticism. Free will is one element in the particular system of fictions involved in morality, but all our thinking requires fictions. To defend moral judgement by a compatibilist argument, though perfectly sound as far as I’m concerned, would miss the point. The argument against morality is an argument against *all* these concepts of

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3 One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves beyond good and evil - that they have the illusion of moral judgement beneath them. This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: that there are no moral facts whatever. Moral judgement has this in common with religious judgement that it believes in realities which do not exist.

Twilight of the Idols; the 'Improvers' of Mankind

See also Schacht, *Nietzsche*, c. pp 417 ff
morality, the whole package or system. It is a genealogical argument: these concepts are made up by the priests of the servile value-system, as ways to acquire power by managing the self-disgust and envy of the weak. They are switching points by means of which those perfectly understandable feelings of self-disgust and envy are converted into blame and guilt, and thereby given a redemptive meaning. Thus they are fictions that serve a particular will to power; what is wrong with them is not that they serve a will but the will they serve.

This is an arresting argument in that it latches on to things that are really there. It’s perfectly true that moral transgression is something one can atone for, and that guilt can thus be expiated, overcome. It has, so to speak, its own exit-route built into it, however painful. In contrast self-loathing and envy of others may be perfectly justified, and if it’s justified there’s no way out. You’re quite simply right to hate yourself and envy others. By transforming these emotions into guilt, and revealing ways out of guilt, the priest heals those who are sick with self-loathing. (It’s a curious thing, incidentally that Nietzsche never considers how this savage resentment will be dealt with in the post-moral world, when the priest’s remedy has failed. But perhaps the answer is that that will be a world of war and struggle.)

It’s an arresting argument but to me an implausible one. It seems to me that the relations of blame, reconciliation etc. are universal in all societies. Priests may place their own magical and religious interpretations on them, but in themselves they are an inbuilt and ineradicable element in the range of human emotions. The sentiment of blame, and guilt or self-blame, is not reducible to any other sentiment, such as resentment, fear or shame. Its distinctive disposition is withdrawal of recognition, exclusion from the moral community. Atonement is the recovery of recognition – at-one-ment with others and oneself through remorse and ethical punishment. I believe that this pattern exists, through varying interpretations and institutions, in all societies, tribal, hierarchical or modern.

Well, I’ve developed these ideas elsewhere and won’t pursue them now. However they lead me to another point in which I agree with Thomas Mann. Mann says that Nietzsche committed two “prime errors”. His diagnosis of the first, which he thinks consists in a

a total and, we must assume, wilful misinterpretation of the relative power of instinct and intellect on earth. 161 strikes me as rather unfocused; in any case it is not our concern. But as to the second error, Mann seems to me to be absolutely right.

The second of Nietzsche’s errors is the utterly false relationship into which he puts life and morality when he treats them as antagonists. The truth is that they belong together. 162 Precisely so. Morality, the system of recognition, exclusion and return that I have mentioned, is the essential element that gives individuals freedom and standing in society. It was Hegel, not Nietzsche, who got this right.

IV

A defender of Nietzsche might argue that he knew this perfectly well; that when he talks about the morality he is opposed to he is talking about specifically Christian morality, and that he sometimes talks about moralities other than Christian morality without meaning to reject them. It is only Christian morality that “is a way of turning one's back on existence” (Will to Power 11)
I don’t think this is right, nor do I think it’s just a terminological issue. No doubt Nietzsche would have agreed that all human groups have value systems, but he thought that moral valuation, the emotional pattern of blame and forgiveness, is specific to the Judaeo-Christian world. [Islamic?] Against that stands the view I’ve put, that this emotional pattern, with its associated behaviour of recognition, exclusion and atonement, is a human universal.

However in saying this I’m certainly not saying that the *ethos* of modern morality, the ideal of all persons as free and equal, is universal. If we try to characterise morality itself in terms of this ethos, we are making an unhistorical mistake. It seems to me, for example, that Tim Scanlon’s contractualist characterisation of morality makes that mistake. Morality as such has no need to assume that we are free and equal beings in any sense other than that we are all capable of accepting its norms and all equally subject to the moral sentiments. Morality is a more basic phenomenon than Kantian autonomy; it’s not derivable from practical reason; it’s as basic and primitive to human beings as you can get.

At any rate, however one reads what Nietzsche meant by morality, his contempt for the distinctive humanistic content of modern morality is as clear as he can possibly make it. Among the things he excoriates are compassion, or the intolerance of suffering, conscience, Kantian autonomy, equality of moral worth and agency, and the golden rule. His thrust is that these characteristic features of the Christian–servile value-system cannot survive true insight into their origin and function. And in any case they lead only exhaustion and nihilism.

Let’s pause and ask why genealogical arguments are supposed to work. If it’s true that moral feelings are somehow *products* of self-loathing and resentment, it doesn’t actually follow that they just *consist* in self-loathing and resentment. Still less does it follow that they are to be condemned or devalued. Nonetheless, if they’re seen in that perspective, the recoil from them may in practice be strong. So here the genealogy has some bite. The trouble is that it lacks any evidence in its support. It’s simply a fantasy from the hermeneutics of suspicion.

It is, in contrast, much more plausible to argue that the ideal of free and equal persons, the emphasis on compassion and forgiveness, and the idea of conscience and a moral *law* are products of Judaeo-Christianity. It’s quite plausible to think that they get their social grip from a historic struggle of the weak to assert themselves against the strong. I’m not saying it’s right. But suppose this *is* the right genealogy of these values. Why should that undermine them?

Christianity one may say, encloses the ideals of equality, forgiveness and love in a beautiful, heart-easing myth – just as it encloses the dialectic of exclusion and reconciliation in a dramatic, sublime, heart-horrifying myth. Take away these myths and you are left with something tinny, self-deceiving, ignoble: the irreverent democratic insistence, all too this-worldly, that we are all just as good as each other, and the collapse of serious moral valuation into conformism and revolt.

Or so it looks from Nietzsche’s aristocratic perspective. But if this was all, then Nietzsche would be just another worrier about the uninspiring nature of humanist values, the loss of heroism, loyalty, reverence, nobility, order of rank – an important one, to be sure. I agree that these are genuine losses, well worth worrying about, even if we agree that aristocratic values have gone for good. Moreover Nietzsche’s criticism of our ideal of human equality demands a response. There is an ideal of civic equality which we are greatly committed to. It is the most valuable achievement of liberal democracy, but the difficulty is to maintain it without founding it on
metaphysical or psychological fairy stories that purport to prove the equal worth of all human beings.

These are certainly worries, yet they are worries from within the humanistic perspective. What takes Nietzsche far beyond this kind of worry and transforms him into something else, something epic, is not only his sense of the hollowness of humanism, fierce and powerful as that is, but – to lean on Mann again – his feeling for the power and glory of the daemonic, and the weakness of humanist ideals in the face of that power. As I understand Mann, the daemonic sees the world as constant war and struggle, and human beings not as self-governing demi-gods but as material, potential, formed and reformed, in play and at stake, in this constant struggle. It proclaims the beauty of this world, its value as an aesthetic phenomenon. Thus, Mann concludes, it is not morality but beauty that is allied to death.

Actually, what one should conclude is that it is the daemonic sense of beauty that is allied to death. There is also the Schillerian sense of beauty, of freedom and order achieved in the face of transience. Nietzsche represents most powerfully the force and depth of the daemonic sense at a time when its rival, the Schillerian sense of beauty, seemed to die. For Mann, this daemonic aestheticism, the affirmation of struggle, the idea of human beings as transformable into new species and forms, lies at the heart of the anti-humanist catastrophes of 20th century Europe. At the same time, he seems to think that it is a power that destroys itself, just because it is on the side of death.

His novels give one the greatest insight into the force of this response. There is the debate in The Magic Mountain, between Settembrini, the shabby and sententious humanist, and Nafta, the sulphurous, sleekly furnished and clothed, Jesuitical daemon. In the end, in the climax of their duel, Nafta shoots himself when Settembrini refuses to shoot him. It is a dramatic tour de force, but one that in retrospect seems to grow ineluctably from Nafta’s whole life. Then in Dr Faustus there is Adrian Leverkühn, the daemically driven composer and serialist, and his friend, the narrator of the novel, the fussy humanist teacher, Serenus Zeitblom. In The Magic Mountain, the hero, Hans Castorp, Settembrini’s protégé and pupil, disappears into the cauldron of the first world war. Dr Faustus, published in 1947, the same year as the lecture on Nietzsche from which I have been quoting, is set against Germany’s decline and fall. Zeitblom, we are told, is writing the story of Leverkühn’s life, during the years from 1943 to 1945, when Germany collapses into final daemonic self-destruction. His story covers Leverkühn’s youth in a crabbed and old-fashioned German town, his contracting of syphilis in a way that is modelled very exactly on Nietzsche’s own report of his experience, his Faustian genius, his collapse into madness in 1930 and his death in 1940. Obviously Leverkühn’s life and thought parallels that of Nietzsche in important ways. Zeitblom, the feeble humanist and boyhood friend, whose attitude towards Leverkühn is made up of love, reverence and pity, survives. Humanism is on the side of life, the daemonic is on the side of death. In their oblique and allegorical ways these novels show that deep truth as plausibly as anything can.