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NIETZSCHE'S RESENTIMENT: A PARADOX

Abdullah BAŞARAN¹

Abstract: This essay explores Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian morality in his work, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche argues that Judeo-Christian slave morality, rooted in *ressentiment* (a festering resentment), inverts the values of the earlier, aristocratic master morality. However, Nietzsche acknowledges the enduring presence of Christianity and questions the possibility of entirely overcoming it. The essay analyzes the concept of *ressentiment* and explores how Nietzsche sees it as the foundation of slave morality. It then examines the co-existence of these contrasting morality systems within Western culture. Furthermore, the essay delves into the question of whether Nietzsche's own critique of Christianity is fueled by bitterness, particularly considering his own Christian heritage. It explores the arguments of Max Scheler, who suggests that Nietzsche mistakes a modern, humanitarian interpretation of Christianity for its core values. The essay concludes that Nietzsche's critique aims to expose the weaknesses of Judeo-Christian morality, not to eradicate it entirely. The essay argues that Nietzsche's critical stance stems from a strong intellectual impulse, rather than personal animosity.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Scheler, Christianity, morality, *Ressentiment*

NIETZSCHE'NİN HİNÇİ: BİR PARADOKS

Öz: Bu makale Friedrich Nietzsche'nin *Ahlâkın Soykütüğü* adlı eserinde Yahudi-Hıristiyan ahlâkına yönelttiği eleştiriyi incelemektedir. Nietzsche, Yahudi-Hıristiyan köle ahlâkının, kökleri *ressentiment*'a (hınca dönük kızgınlık) dayanan, daha önceki aristokratik efendi ahlâkının değerlerini tersine çevirdiğini savunur. Bununla birlikte, Nietzsche Hıristiyanlığın kalıcı varlığını kabul eder ve onu tamamen aşma olasılığını sorgular. Bu makale *ressentiment* kavramını analiz etmekte ve Nietzsche'nin bunu nasıl köle ahlâkının temeli olarak gördüğünü araştırmaktadır. Daha sonra bu zıt ahlâk sistemlerinin Batı kültürü içinde bir arada varoluşunu incelemektedir. Makale ayrıca, Nietzsche'nin Hıristiyanlık eleştirisinin, özellikle de kendi Hıristiyan mirası göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, sert bir tutumdan beslenip beslenmediği sorusunu irdelemektedir. Nietzsche'nin Hıristiyanlığın temel değerleri yerine modern, insani bir yorumunu yanlış anladığını öne süren Max Scheler'in argümanlarını incelemektedir. Makale, Nietzsche'nin eleştirisinin Yahudi-Hıristiyan ahlâkını tamamen ortadan kaldırmayı değil, zayıflıklarını ortaya

¹ Dr. Öğr. Üyesi | Assistant Professor

Hitit Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe ve Din Bilimleri Bölümü | Hitit University, Faculty of

Theology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences

abdullahbasaran@hitit.edu.tr

0000-0001-9789-7456

çıkarmayı amaçladığı sonucuna varmaktadır. Makale, Nietzsche'nin eleştirel duruşunun kişisel husumetten ziyade güçlü bir entelektüel dürtüden kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Scheler, Hıristiyanlık, ahlâk, huñç

1. Introduction

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche, using his genealogical method, concludes that all noble (aristocratic) values are reevaluated by the slave morality. What the system of noble or master morality calls something “good” is translated into “evil” in the slave morality. The main motivation of slaves, according to Nietzsche, is *ressentiment*, a lasting mental attitude surpassing simple emotions like revenge, hatred, or envy. As long as there exist masters, slaves have this embittered feeling, suggesting an endless slave revolt. Another consequence is that these two value systems—master/Greco-Roman and slave/Judeo-Christian—coexist in our modern culture. Just as master morality cannot be defeated by the slave revolt, slave morality cannot be overcome. Nietzsche rejected the Enlightenment's zeal for perfection and overcoming systems. Instead, he suggests embracing life's complexity and acknowledging the coexistence of multiple morality systems. However, this also means that Judeo-Christian morality survives—or rather, *must* survive—Nietzsche's attacks. If this is indeed the case, from his early works like *The Birth of Tragedy* to his later ones like *The Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*, does Nietzsche simply want to *weaken* Judeo-Christian values rather than completely *overcome* them?

An interesting question arises from this. If Nietzsche's critique allows Christian values to survive, does this not suggest a paradox? If what he opposes cannot be ultimately defeated, then does this not imply a *lasting* bitterness towards Christianity? Philosopher Max Scheler argues that Nietzsche's focus on *ressentiment* blinds him to the essence of Christian morality and distorts historical facts due to his misinterpretations. Thus, this essay will explore whether Christianity, as Nietzsche's own tradition and source (creditor) of concepts like bad conscience and sin, can be seen as influencing (debtor) his analysis. In other words, did Nietzsche fail to distinguish between the cultural aspects of Christianity and its core tenets? Finally, can we claim that the continued existence of Christianity, despite his criticisms and disappointment with Wagner, perpetuates bitterness in his philosophy? To pursue this line of questioning, this essay will focus on the concept of *ressentiment* and explore how Nietzsche's criticisms leave us with a paradox. Did Nietzsche, who describes Judeo-Christian *ressentiment* negatively, fail to distinguish Christian love from its amalgamation with a more general humanitarian love? Did his own background color his views on Christianity?²

² Here I would like to express my gratitude to Reviewer-2, who rejected the essay. They not only identified technical issues with the pagination but also correctly identified the speculative and even manipulative nature of my reading of Nietzsche. This was intentional, and not to be “corrected” by any reading.

2. What Is *Ressentiment*?

In the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche discusses the revaluation of values by the slave revolt. The aristocratic scale of values is inverted in slave morality: “good” becomes “evil” and “bad” becomes “good” because the powerful impose their own terms (Nietzsche, 2006, I:2-6, p. 11-16; 2011, p. 189). This inversion is driven by *ressentiment*, which Allison (2001) defines as “the sense of the ongoing bite or sting of an embittered feeling, the lingering or resonating sentiment of a ‘sickly’ revenge.” (p. 205) *Ressentiment* goes beyond simple revenge in two ways. First, revenge can dissipate over time, whereas *ressentiment* is a permanent, festering reaction that grows within. Second, *ressentiment* distorts morality by inverting conventional rules (Scheler, 1994, p. 26).³ Therefore, slave morality can be seen as “a negative creation of values” (Allison, 2001, p. 212).

Nietzsche uses the Jews as a historical example to elaborate on his concept of *ressentiment*. Their powerlessness for over two thousand years, living under various authorities, is, according to him, sufficient time for hatred and the feeling of revenge against those in power to fester. Because of their dwelling on the past, rather than actively forgetting like the noble class, this resentment grows. Therefore, as those who embody slave values, the Jews invert the values of their authorities, their enemies, or the noble ones. Nietzsche writes, “The Jews, that priestly people who in the end were only able to achieve satisfaction from their enemies and conquerors through a radical revaluation of their values, hence through an act of the most spiritual revenge” (Nietzsche, 2006, I:7, p. 17; cf. Nietzsche, 2011, p. 205). This “spiritual revenge,” i.e., *ressentiment*, is the key that initiates the slave revolt in morality.

Slaves, or the Jews in this case, being eminently defeated, humiliated, and weakened, have a desire for revenge that permeates their moral system. Fueled by powerful revenge and hatred, the Jews create new ideals and invert noble values. As Nietzsche points out, “The beginning of the slaves’ revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values” (Nietzsche, 2006, I:10, p. 20). Thus, the negative creation of values driven by *ressentiment* becomes a suggestive victory: By devaluing aristocratic values, the slaves elevate their own system (Nietzsche, 2006, I:8, p. 18-19). However, Nietzsche views this victory as delusional. There is no true triumph; instead, slaves find an anesthetic purpose or meaning simply to survive and endure. In other words, the slave revolt driven by *ressentiment* is not an ultimate path to defeating aristocratic values, but rather an intoxication that keeps slaves living in a self-deception (Nietzsche, 2006, I:9, p. 19).⁴

³ As Scheler defines it briefly, “Ressentiment brings about its most important achievement when it determines a whole ‘morality,’ perverting the rules of preference until what was ‘evil’ appears to be ‘good.’” (Scheler, 1994, p. 28)

⁴ It should be noted that Nietzsche argues a slavish morality developed in response to oppression informed Christianity and, consequently, modernity. This system of values is often referred to as Judeo-Christian ethics. For an analysis of the ‘revenge instinct’ in Christianity, see Vattimo (2006, pp. 15-17). Călinescu (1977,

3. Overcoming Judeo-Christian Morality?

Nietzsche contrasts Judeo-Christian slave morality with the noble morality of the Greeks and Romans through historical examples. For instance, in the Trojan War, the Greeks never abandoned their respect for their worthy enemies, such as Hector (*Iliad*, Book XXII). Since both sides possessed equal power, they held each other in equally high regard, exemplifying noble morality (Allison, 2001, p. 207).⁵ In contrast, slave morality, born from powerlessness, breeds envy and revenge. Respect for the enemy curdles into *ressentiment* against the ruling class. Through this inversion, slaves reframe their weakness as a virtue and a victory over their oppressors (Nietzsche, 2006, I:13, p. 25-27).

Following Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of how aristocratic "good and bad" is translated into slavish "good and evil" in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, we may arrive at another consequence out of this delineation: These two different morality systems, which are master and Judeo-Christian slave morality, have coexisted in Western culture. This raises the question of how these contrasting value systems coexist. As Nietzsche (2006) writes in the section 16 of the first essay,

The two *opposing values* 'good and bad', 'good and evil' have fought a terrible battle for thousands of years on earth; and although the latter has been dominant for a long time, there is still no lack of places where the battle remains undecided. You could even say that, in the meantime, it has reached ever greater heights but at the same time has become ever deeper and more intellectual: so that there is, today, perhaps no more distinguishing feature of the '*higher nature*', the intellectual nature, than to be divided in this sense and really and truly a battle ground for these opposites. (I:16, p. 31-32; italics in original)

Nietzsche argues that master and slave morality, despite their fundamental opposition, coexist in a never-ending battle. This aligns with his view of overcoming, which implies assigning value to "newness" and "betterment," echoing Enlightenment ideals. Similarly, Hegel's attempt to overcome modernity's errors is essentially an extension of modernity itself, as he merely seeks to establish new values within its framework, rather than abandoning metaphysics altogether. Nietzsche, on the other hand, distances himself from the Judeo-Christian values, which he terms *decadence* (decline, exhaustion, and decay). However, as Călinescu states, Nietzsche recognizes that *decadence* is an inevitable aspect of every age. Therefore, instead of seeking to transcend it, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing it, becoming aware of its manipulative tactics, and resisting its influence. And Călinescu continues: "the most important thing is to recognize it, to become conscious of it, and to resist being misled by its various tricks and disguises" (p. 183). In simpler terms, Nietzsche advocates for confronting, critiquing, and weakening the principles of slave morality.

p. 193) briefly suggests that modernity inherited this resentment from Christianity in his book *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*.

⁵ Nietzsche also considers Romans as the noble. That's why, hereinafter, we may use Greco-Roman morality for the system of master values.

Nietzsche's genealogical approach, however, rejects the idea of entirely overcoming existing moral systems. In other words, our historical context and connection to tradition are inescapable. The very fact that Judeo-Christian values persist despite critiques by modern philosophers serves as a key reason why Nietzsche does not advocate for complete eradication of these moral frameworks.

Nietzsche recognizes the enduring appeal of the Judeo-Christian worldview, where suffering can be alleviated through faith, even if it means a certain powerlessness. Rather than ignoring this human impulse, he argues that both master and slave morality coexist. Given the impossibility of complete eradication, Nietzsche proposes that his genealogical analysis, particularly in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, serves not to abolish Christian values, but to expose their weaknesses by meticulously dissecting their origins in slave morality.

4. Deconstructing Nietzsche: A Paradox

Our analysis of Nietzsche's critique of morality reveals his core idea: that master and slave morality coexist. He demonstrates this through his exploration of how Judeo-Christian values, despite his attempts to weaken them, have demonstrably persisted. This raises a crucial question: Does the continued prevalence of Christianity necessarily imply an underlying bitterness in Nietzsche's own perspective?

Max Scheler (1994) critiques Nietzsche's view of *ressentiment* as the foundation of Christian morality. Scheler argues that Nietzsche overlooks the core of Christian ethics and confuses Christian love for one's neighbor with the modern concept of universal love for humanity (p. 49). Christian love, for Scheler, is an active spiritual movement, while modern humanitarian love is a passive feeling. Thus, Scheler contends that Nietzsche is not critiquing true Christian morality, but rather a modern, bourgeois interpretation of it, where Christian beliefs are combined with this more passive form of love (pp. 29, 37, 49). Scheler concludes that Nietzsche's criticisms only hold weight when applied to this specific, modern understanding of Christian moral values (p. 49). Because, "the humanitarian movement," writes Scheler (1994),

is in its essence a *ressentiment* phenomenon, as appears from the very fact that this socio-historical emotion is by no means based on a spontaneous and original *affirmation of a positive value*, but on a *protest, a counter-impulse* (hatred, envy, revenge, etc.) against ruling minorities that are known to be in the possession of positive values. "Mankind" is not the immediate object of love (it cannot be, for love can be aroused only by concrete objects)—it is merely a *trump card* against a hated thing. (p. 55; italics in original)

Therefore, Scheler (1994) argues that modern humanitarian love, also called "altruism" (p. 56), is a disguised form of *ressentiment* against God. According to Scheler, the Christianity Nietzsche encountered was merely a manifestation of this *ressentiment* within modern "decadent" society. In essence, Scheler believes Nietzsche is fundamentally wrong on two counts: (1) He fails to recognize the historical fact that

genuine Christian values, like love for one's neighbor, have been perverted throughout history into a culture of *ressentiment* embedded in modern humanitarianism, the very culture Nietzsche himself inhabited. (2) Consequently, Nietzsche mistakenly equates the core faith and original values of Christianity with the values that emerged within the culture of Christendom.⁶

Furthermore, the example of the economy between the creator and the debtor would also be helpful here (Nietzsche, 2006, II:4-8, p. 39-46). As Allison (2001) succinctly points out,

to say that I shall incur an obligation means that I must pay back the particular *debt* I have assumed. I must settle the terms of contract. Quite simply, I answer for, I am *responsible* for, the obligation I have incurred. Or else—or else!—I shall have to suffer the consequences for my breach of contract. Second, I *remember* all too well what these consequences can be, because *fear* has impressed this into my *memory*. (p. 222; italics in original)

In the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche uses the creditor-debtor relationship to illustrate the concept of indebtedness. He applies it in two ways: first, to the debt of the present generation to their ancestors. This debt signifies the responsibility each community member has to protect the state, a responsibility owed to those who came before (Nietzsche, 2006, II:19, p. 60-61). However, it is important to remember that Nietzsche also explores the flip side of this concept—the potential for resentment to fester within the debtor.

A key question emerges: How does Nietzsche reconcile his critique of morality with his own Christian heritage? As Nietzsche (1980) himself acknowledges, humans are shaped by history and tradition (“[historical men] do not know how unhistorically they think and act despite all their history”) (p. 13). Born into Christianity, Nietzsche cannot entirely escape its influence. However, rather than viewing himself as a passive debtor to his ancestors, it is more accurate to see him as a critical inheritor. His relentless critique of Christianity, evident from his early works like *The Birth of Tragedy* to his later writings (*The Genealogy of Morality*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist*), suggests a deep-seated feeling of *ressentiment*, a sense of resentment against the limitations imposed by this inherited tradition.

The enduring presence of Christianity within Nietzsche's framework poses a significant challenge. Despite his critique, Christian values persist, necessitating a continued critical engagement. This ongoing struggle might explain the intensity of his critique, evident in his works (consider including specific examples here). However, attributing his stance solely to personal bitterness obscures the core of his argument.

Despite all attacks, Christianity has still survived, and paradoxically must coexist with the master morality in Nietzsche's picture. This would only fuel Nietzsche's critique of

⁶ For a philosophical discussion concerning the distinction between the faith of Christianity and the culture of Christendom, see Heidegger (1977, p. 63) and Vattimo (2002, p. 115).

Christianity. Furthermore, in his life, he bore witness to the decay of his only hope to gain a victory over decadence: Richard Wagner (Nietzsche, 2006, III:3-5, p. 70-73). Wagner effectively let him down by speaking the language of metaphysics. This disappointment, according to our reading, explicitly increases his embittered attitude, or *ressentiment*, toward the decadence of his time—the values of Christianity imbued with modernity (Babich, 2006, p. 187).⁷

Nietzsche's entire body of work grapples with core Christian values like reason, meaning, and concepts like guilt and sin. He positions these as antithetical to the master morality he champions. The opposition between the Dionysian spirit, emphasizing passion and instinct, and the Apollonian, focused on reason and order, exemplifies this conflict. Similarly, he contrasts Greco-Roman ideals with Judeo-Christian morality.⁸ Finally, his concept of Zarathustra, the embodiment of the overman, stands in opposition to the Christian ideal. However, it is important to distinguish critique from *ressentiment*. While Nietzsche critiques Christianity, *ressentiment*, in his view, is a specific type of resentment stemming from a powerless position, not mere disagreement. He writes,

Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying 'yes' to itself, slave morality says 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self': and this 'no' is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance — this essential orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself — is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have *an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all*, — its action is basically a reaction. (Nietzsche, 2006, I:10, p. 20; my italics)

While Nietzsche critiques the phenomenon of Judeo-Christian *ressentiment* in harsh terms, a question arises: Does the intensity of his own critique against Christianity suggest a similar undercurrent of *ressentiment*? Perhaps his relentless criticism stems not from personal animosity, but from a strong critical impulse. For instance, his scathing analysis of pity (e.g., in *On the Genealogy of Morality*) could be seen as a challenge to a core Christian value, but not necessarily driven by personal resentment.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian morality presents a fascinating paradox. Despite his relentless attacks, aimed at weakening if not eradicating these values, Christianity persists. This raises questions about the nature of his critique and the potential influence of his own background. Scheler's critique offers a compelling argument: Nietzsche might have misjudged the core of Christian ethics. He may have confused authentic Christian love with the modern, passive form of humanitarianism.

⁷ Here Babich (2006) highlights Nietzsche's big frustration by saying that, "Nietzsche's words failed to arrest world history (in advance), just as his longing failed to bring back the Greece of the past (even in the form of a rebirth of the tragic art in the music of his age, whether Wagner or Bizet)." (p. 187)

⁸ Giorgio Colli (2014) indicates in his "Afterword" to the *Beyond Good and Evil/On the Genealogy of Morality* collection, Dionysus is now an ethical-theoretical figure rather than an aesthetic symbol as in *The Birth of Tragedy* (p. 424).

This suggests that Nietzsche's target might not be genuine Christianity, but rather a distorted version of it prevalent in his time. Nietzsche's own heritage also plays a role. Born into Christianity, he can't entirely escape its influence. While acknowledging this debt, he positions himself not as a passive debtor but as a critical inheritor. This constant struggle with his heritage can explain the intensity of his critique, but attributing it solely to bitterness simplifies his complex argument.

Ultimately, Nietzsche's project goes beyond mere destruction. He challenges core Christian values like reason and guilt, contrasting them with his ideal of master morality. His entire body of work grapples with these concepts, offering alternative interpretations. While he critiques Christianity, it's crucial to distinguish his critique from *ressentiment*, a specific type of resentment stemming from a powerless position. Does Nietzsche's critique achieve his goal of weakening Judeo-Christian values? The answer remains open. Christianity persists, but perhaps its influence is transformed through critical engagement, a process that Nietzsche himself embodies. His work serves as a powerful challenge to established moral frameworks, inviting us to critically examine the values that guide our lives.

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