

## ***Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment—*** **Guy Elgat**

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Readers interested in Nietzsche's ethics and moral psychology will doubtless find *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment* by Guy Elgat to be a valuable contribution to Nietzsche scholarship. The book, subtitled *Revenge and Justice in On the Genealogy of Morals*, offers a sustained, rigorous analysis of Nietzsche's conception of *ressentiment* in his most prominent ethical work along with, perhaps surprisingly, an account of *ressentiment's* relationship to justice. In seven chapters, Elgat argues for two main claims: first, that "*ressentiment* is typically blind to matters of justice, and there is no essential connection between the two" (4), and second, that "Nietzsche's criticism of *ressentiment* is itself based on his view that *ressentiment* is a hindrance to the attainment of justice" (4). This review will summarize the main themes of each chapter, offering some critical remarks along the way.

Chapter 1 is mostly stage setting, dedicated to interpreting Elgat's chief opponents, Robert Solomon and Eugen Dühring, on the relationship between *ressentiment* and justice. Elgat outlines five ways in which *ressentiment* might be said to lie at the origin of justice, setting himself up to offer an interpretation of Nietzsche on *ressentiment* and justice that both opposes Solomon's reading and captures Nietzsche's rejection of Dühring's position.

In Chapter 2, Elgat analyzes the psychology of *ressentiment*, defending a 'thin' interpretation of the phenomenon along the following lines: "*Ressentiment* is a complex mental state that arises from a feeling of displeasure, is characterized by a negative affect of hate, and involves the desire to retaliate—to take revenge—upon the perceived cause of one's displeasure" (26). Furthermore, *Ressentiment* is characterized as instinctive, involuntary, and cutting across Nietzsche's distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' human beings. Finally, and most importantly for Elgat, *ressentiment* is not laden with any moral or otherwise axiological presuppositions.

This final aspect of Elgat's 'thin' interpretation of *ressentiment* strikes me as especially apt. He succeeds in developing a reading upon which *ressentiment* itself is not moralized, as there are good reasons for this both textually and systematically. Consider, for

example, that Nietzsche is clear from his very first mention of *ressentiment* in GM that “the slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values” (GM I 10). Nietzsche goes on to note that it is a *specific* type of *ressentiment* that lies at the origin of morality: “the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds...” (Ibid.). So, not *all* instances of *ressentiment* have the same tendency toward the creation of moral values. And indeed, since it is entirely unclear how *ressentiment* could ‘give birth’ to new moral values if it were itself already laden with or informed by them, Elgat is right to stress the non-moral nature of *ressentiment*.

Chapter 3 argues, contra Solomon and Dühring, that *ressentiment* neither reliably tracks violations of non-moral justice nor gives rise to just adjudications or settlements. Thus, Elgat claims, “there is nothing in the nature of *ressentiment* that endows it with credibility in matters of justice” (52). In support of this claim, Elgat offers five criteria necessary for (non-moral) punishment to be just: “it must be directed at the (1) correct and (2) responsible agent who (3) did something wrong or unjust in some sense (moral or other) and be (4) proportional in its force to the offense while (5) maintaining objectivity and being mindful of possible mitigating circumstances under which the agent acted” (53). Elgat contends that *ressentiment* not only fails to conform to these standards in response to perceived wrongs, but also frequently *impedes* the attainment of adjudications and settlements that *do* meet the five criteria.

While one might be going too far to object that Elgat simply smuggles his five criteria of justice into the picture, it isn’t unfair to ask where they are coming from. After all, Elgat readily admits that “Nietzsche does not provide us with a detailed analysis of the concept of justice” (53). Furthermore, while Elgat stresses that these are criteria of a non-moral punitive justice, this point alone surely isn’t enough to secure them as being in line with Nietzsche’s own thinking. And in fact, Nietzsche shows clear approval toward arrangements of what look to be pre-moral punitive justice that fail to meet all of Elgat’s criteria. Consider, for example, the following discussion of ancient creditor-debtor relations:

“The debtor made a contract with the creditor and pledged that if he should fail to repay he would substitute something else that he ‘possessed,’ ... and everywhere and from early times one had exact evaluations, *legal* evaluations, of the individual limbs and parts of the body from this point of view ... I consider it as an advance, as evidence of a freer, more generous, *more Roman* conception of law when the Twelve Tables of Rome decreed it a matter of indifference how much or how little the creditor cut off in such cases: ‘*si plus minusve secuerunt, ne fraude esto.*’ (‘If they have secured more or less, let that be no crime.’)” (GM II 5)

What should we make of this passage, in which there appears to be not merely a lack of emphasis on the criterion of proportionality, but an explicit repudiation of it? One

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thought might be that it isn't actually an example of the sort of ancient, pre-moral justice Elgat has in mind, but Elgat himself claims it as one (140). But in a related endnote (164n6) he simply passes over the fact that Nietzsche views the Romans' 'advance' as an overcoming of the concern for proportionality by engaging only with the merciful half of the decree. Given the prominent role played by the proportionality criterion in Chapter 7, this piece of text spells trouble for Elgat's broader project.

In Chapter 4, Elgat turns to the issues of the psychological possibility of the slave revolt in morality, connecting the limiting and distorting effects of *ressentiment* to the self-deception of the slaves. The more specific aim of Chapter 4 is to attempt to solve the interpretive puzzle brought about by the fact that slave revolt in morality seems to require attribution to the slaves of contradictory beliefs about their newly acquired values on the one hand and their reasons for adopting these values on the other (72). Elgat draws on Alfred Mele's recent work on self-deception to offer a 'deflationary account' of the slaves' predicament that ultimately resolves this apparent tension. While some readers might worry that such a move risks slipping into anachronism, Elgat is careful to avoid a flatfooted attribution of Mele's view to Nietzsche, instead drawing on Mele's insights where appropriate to lend psychological plausibility to a presentation of the slave psyche that still feels very much to be Nietzsche's. The chapter is one of the book's most illuminating and successful.

In contrast to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 is far less of a triumph. This chapter, which departs from the central theme of *ressentiment*'s relation to justice, addresses the role of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's genealogy of the bad conscience in GM II, as well as *ressentiment*'s connection to the ascetic ideal in GM III. An objection to this chapter stems from Elgat's treatment of the bad conscience. More precisely, one might take issue with his attempt to "explain in what sense it is the man of *ressentiment* who has the invention of the bad conscience on his conscience" (9), as this entire project relies on a misreading of Nietzsche's genealogy of guilt in GM II.

Contemplating how the man of *ressentiment* has the invention of bad conscience on his conscience, Elgat writes, "the problem is that Nietzsche explicitly explains that bad conscience 'is the instinct of cruelty that turns back after it can no longer discharge itself externally' (EH, Genealogy). Now, this may sound similar enough to the phenomenon of the man of *ressentiment*; but the instincts of cruelty are of an *active* kind, while *ressentiment* is *reactive*. Can we resolve this tension?" (104). In fact, there is no tension: Elgat is correct that Nietzsche characterizes bad conscience as an active instinct turned inward, and he is also correct about *ressentiment*'s essential reactivity, but he is wrong to interpret Nietzsche as indicating that the 'man of *ressentiment*' has the invention of bad conscience on his conscience, that is, that the phenomenon of bad conscience arises from the psyche of individuals too weak to strike back immediately at those who cause them pain. Elgat actually moves between referring to bad conscience and 'bad conscience' in this

discussion, only sometimes adopting the scare quotes Nietzsche himself applies when referring to the invention of the phenomenon he takes to be on the conscience of the man of *ressentiment* in GM II 11. But these marks make all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

The origin of bad conscience lies, Nietzsche makes perfectly clear, in the socialization of humankind generally: “I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced—that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace” (GM II 16). It is, Nietzsche adds, the internalization of active, aggressive, cruel instincts. The bad conscience, however, amounts to no *invention* at all; rather, internalization is a mechanistic process that *any* instinct undergoes when unable to express itself outwardly (Ibid.). Furthermore, unlike the development of ‘bad conscience’ (guilt), which *could* be considered an invention, Nietzsche’s evaluation of bad conscience is not entirely negative: He calls the human being altered by the pangs of bad conscience “subtle”, “marvelous” and “pregnant with a future” (Ibid.). In sum, by mistaking bad conscience for ‘bad conscience’, Elgat starts off his interpretation of Nietzsche’s genealogy of guilt on the wrong foot and unnecessarily complicates the already difficult genealogy of guilt presented in GM II.

In Chapter 6, Elgat offers an account of how the *ressentiment* of the slaves falsifies a more fundamental, pre- and non-moral conception of justice by transforming it into the idea of moral justice, which is explained in terms of the “moral equality of all before universally authoritative moral values” (9). Finally, Elgat returns to the idea of non-moral justice in Chapter 7, arguing that Nietzsche offers a “vindicatory genealogy of the capacity to be (non-morally) just to others in exchange, punishment, and the bestowing of rights and impositions of duties” (10). According to Elgat, Nietzsche’s positive notion of justice is that of an adjudication or exchange reached by two parties of equal power (141; see also GM II 8). He then builds upon this interpersonal foundation to develop an account of ‘intellectual justice’, which involves attentiveness to and appreciation of particularity that he believes is central to understanding Nietzsche’s critique of morality. Outside of the textual objection I raised to the proportionality criterion above, I have one other concern about Elgat’s account of Nietzsche’s positive conception of justice. Describing the importance of power relations to Nietzschean justice, Elgat states, “it is when the parties are more or less of equal power (and recognize it to be so) that there is less possibility of one side taking advantage of the other, that a fair relation of equivalences emerges, a *just* relation” (141). But as Elgat seems to concede, is possible both for two parties to be of roughly equal power and to recognize this, and also for one party to take advantage of the other such that an agreement turns out lopsided. In such

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Alexander Nehamas for impressing upon me the importance of Nietzsche’s use of scare quotes when referring to the guilty ‘bad conscience’ (as opposed to the bad conscience).

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a case, we would seem to need to appeal to some further standard about *which* agreements between equals are the truly just ones, since some are unbalanced and others aren't. But since Elgat denies that any further, 'true' standard exists beyond the power relations themselves, he doesn't seem to have the resources to do so.

Here I have briefly outlined the general shape of Guy Elgat's *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment* and offered several points of critical commentary. Elgat's book is a welcome contribution to Nietzsche scholarship, and his richly detailed account of the psychology of *ressentiment* is especially worthy of study for those interested in Nietzsche's ethics and moral psychology.

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### Works Cited

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