

Nietzsche's Critique of Power: Mimicry and the Advantage of the Weak

THOMAS MEREDITH *Santa Clara University, United States*


While most scholars understand Nietzsche as a full-throated proponent of power, I argue that his attitude toward power is far more ambivalent. Nietzsche's critical attitude toward power is most apparent in his analysis of mimicry—the process whereby one organism (the mimic) gains an evolutionary advantage through superficially resembling another (the model). Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry shows how power makes the strong not only indifferent but also actively hostile to adaptation and novelty. In contrast, the weak, precisely because of their weakness, are incentivized to understand, adapt to, and exploit the psychology of the strong. Nietzsche reveals that mimicry is the means by which the weak were able to achieve a revolution in values through persuasion rather than force. Ultimately, I argue that Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry provides a compelling account of social change, and reveals how power is maladaptive, in that it blinds and ossifies the powerful.

If there is one thing that everyone knows about Nietzsche, it is that he is a philosopher of power. Whether interpreted politically, as domination over others,¹ or ethically, as the realization of one's true capacities,² or ontologically, as mastery of nature,³ power is assumed to be one of—if not the—highest values in Nietzsche's philosophy. In other words, most scholars read Nietzsche as arguing that power is the unambiguous good toward which all living things strive. There is, however, an under-examined theme in Nietzsche's work that calls into question his seemingly unequivocal endorsement of power. This line of thought emphasizes the ways in which power limits—rather than enables—the powerful. As Nietzsche himself puts it in *Twilight of the Idols*: “It pays dearly to come to power: power stupefies” (IX 1).⁴

Nietzsche's critique of power is most evident in his analysis of mimicry—the process whereby one organism (the mimic) gains an evolutionary advantage through superficially resembling another (the model). Nietzsche's first use of the term, mimicry, occurs in his 1881 *Daybreak*, the work in which Nietzsche begins in earnest his natural historical or genealogical project. It then reappears throughout the majority of his other middle and late-period writings, including *The Gay Science* [1882/1887], *On the Genealogy of Morality* [1887], and *Twilight of the Idols* [1888]. Despite this, Nietzsche scholars have largely ignored the role of mimicry in Nietzsche's thought. Further, even those who do attend to mimicry have overlooked its most important function: to reveal the naivety and complacency of the powerful.

In this article, I argue that Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry shows how power makes the strong not only indifferent but also actively hostile to adaptation and novelty. In contrast, the weak, precisely because of their weakness, are forced to learn about and adapt to, new and challenging conditions. And it is precisely this education that is, in Nietzsche's view, the weak's greatest advantage. Their survival depends upon their ability to anticipate and interpret the intentions of the strong. In clarifying the weak's strength, Nietzsche reveals mimicry as the means by which the weak were able to identify, understand, and, in turn, exploit certain features of the noble's own psychology.

Mimicry also clarifies Nietzsche's conceptions of power's manifold objects and modalities. Power can be directed at controlling the self (i.e., self-mastery) or at controlling others. It can also be manifested through physical strength or psychological manipulation. It consequently adds an important dimension to political philosophy's understanding of Nietzsche, revealing his astute observations not only of humankind's unending competition for power, but also of power's many forms and fundamental limitations.

Thomas Meredith , Academic Year Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Santa Clara University, United States, tmeredith@scu.edu.

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¹ See, for example, Berkowitz (1995), Dombowsky (2014), and Drochon (2016).

² See, for example, Cavell (1990) and Conant (2001).

³ See, for example, Heidegger (1967a; 1967b) and Strauss (1985).

⁴ Citations to Nietzsche's works are given parenthetically in the text, referring to aphorism numbers or section headings, and using the following abbreviations: *A* = *Antichrist*; *BGE* = *Beyond Good and Evil*; *D* = *Daybreak*; *EH* = *Ecce Homo*; *HAH* = *Human, All Too Human*; *GS* = *The Gay Science*; *GM* = *On the Genealogy of Morality*; *TI* = *Twilight of the Idols*; *WS* = *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. In the cases of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *Ecce Homo*, references are to the part and section numbers (*GM* III 12). The discussions of previous works in the third part of *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Write Such Good Books,” are cited by the appropriate abbreviation followed by the section number (*EH*, “BGE” 2). Translations of Nietzsche's works are my own.

In particular, attention to mimicry helps resolve the paradox at the heart of Nietzsche's political thought: how the "weak" slave was ultimately able to conquer the "powerful" noble.⁵ I argue that the analysis of mimicry exposes the psychological grounds of the noble's willing submission to slave values. It reveals how slave morality provides the noble with novel and more extreme ways of exercising power over himself by intensifying the ascetic practices already present in noble morality. By emphasizing continuity rather than breakage between the two moralities (noble and slave), mimicry provides a clearer understanding of Nietzsche's famous but opaque concept of the "revaluation of values" (*Umwertung der Werthe*). Specifically, it shows that revaluation involves the reinterpretation and redeployment of previous values. Slave morality is not simply a radical negation of and break with noble morality. It is also an extension and intensification of it. Revaluation is thus repetition with a difference.

Nietzsche's analysis illuminates the nature of social change and political revolution insofar as it suggests that revolution is iterative: *revolution* involves both progress and return. Counter-intuitively, this also shows us how Nietzsche can be a resource for overturning dominant power structures. His analysis of the noble's willing submission provides insights into the psychology of the powerful that are relevant to cross-disciplinary debates about the relationship between power and knowledge. Specifically, it reveals the epistemic advantage of the disempowered: their ability to know the powerful better than they know themselves. It shows, in turn, how this knowledge can be used to overturn the existing order. From this perspective, Nietzsche becomes a useful interlocutor for theorists of liberation.

In what follows, I delineate Nietzsche's peculiar understanding of mimicry as encompassing not only imitation but also assimilation—the process of absorbing the logic behind the model's customs and beliefs. I argue that, in assimilating to the noble's religious customs and practices, the slave comes to understand the three interrelated characteristics underlying the noble's conscience: their desire for self-mastery, their vanity or concern for the opinion of others, and their belief in themselves as separate from nature. The slave exploited those features of noble morality (which Nietzsche exposes as weaknesses) through what I call "transformative" mimicry, wherein the slave repeats the noble conscience but with a crucial difference. Transformative mimicry exaggerates those weaknesses and turns them against the noble. Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry thus reveals how power is maladaptive, in that it blinds and ossifies the powerful. Ultimately, I argue that Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry helps us come to a deeper understanding of his thought by undermining the explicitly political aspect of his revaluation project. Insofar as it implicitly critiques the

concept of the "noble type," it also calls into question the possibility and desirability of noble politics.

STANDARD APPROACHES TO NIETZSCHE ON POWER

My analysis of mimicry challenges the standard reading of Nietzsche, which, broadly speaking, sees him as venerating power and aligning himself normatively with the noble.⁶ That reading understands Nietzsche's political philosophy primarily as a response to the leveling tendencies of modern civilization and its increasing hostility toward expressions of power (e.g., hierarchy, inequality, severity) and thus life itself. According to this reading, Nietzsche traces the rise of these tendencies back to the clash between two distinct and fundamentally opposed modes of valuation, slave and noble. The so-called slave revolt in morality, that is, the elevation of slave values (e.g., meekness, passivity, pity), repudiated power and thus negated life, supplanting noble values (e.g., strength, activity, cruelty), which endorsed power and thus affirmed life. Nietzsche's ultimate aim, in this reading, is to redeem human civilization by recapturing those values that promote rather than suppress power.

While the standard reading corresponds to Nietzsche's ostensible teaching, it does so in ways that obscure important nuances in Nietzsche's thought, in particular his understanding of noble and slave (or what he also refers to—in his less polemical works—as "common" or "base"). This is due, in part, to the standard reading's adherence to the extreme rhetoric Nietzsche deploys in the first treatise of the *Genealogy*—which depicts the noble as *essentially* healthy, strong, and immune to reactive effects and the slave as *essentially* diseased, moribund, and seething with *ressentiment*—and its reading of that depiction into Nietzsche's other works. However, the standard reading either overlooks or dismisses the unique character of the first treatise's rhetoric and the way in which it distorts Nietzsche's more nuanced understanding of those two types.

The first treatise is unique in Nietzsche's corpus because it *ignores* noble morality: it focuses exclusively on the relationship between the "superior" noble and the "inferior" slave, as opposed to the relationship between equals, that is, between nobles themselves. This analytical approach serves that treatise's polemical aims insofar as it enables Nietzsche to portray the noble as *more* autonomous and *less* moral than he actually is (or, rather, than Nietzsche elsewhere reveals him to be).⁷ The analysis of mimicry, however, sheds light on and, in turn, ameliorates these exaggerations

⁵ Other commentators have observed this paradox but failed to satisfactorily resolve it (Deleuze 1983; Hatab 2011; Leiter 2015; Ottmann 1999; Ridley 1998; Scheler [1915] 2004; Staten 1990; Stegmaier 1994; Strong 2000).

⁶ While the standard reading I outline here does not capture the nuances among the various scholarly accounts of Nietzsche's philosophy, it does reflect a description broadly shared by those accounts. See, for example, Berkowitz (1995), Deleuze (1983), Drochon (2016), Kaufmann (1974), Leiter (2015), Ottmann (1999), Reginster (2006), Richardson (1996), Ridley (1998), Staten (1990), Stegmaier (1994), and Strong (2000).

⁷ On this point see my previous article (Meredith 2020, 253–4); compare also Wood (2021).

and distortions. It not only emphasizes Nietzsche's view of the noble as bound by moral obligations to his peers (cf. *HAH I* 45; *D* 199; *BGE* 260)⁸ but also reveals how the slave was able to exploit noble morality and use it *against* the noble.⁹

Nietzsche is, of course, sympathetic to noble morality. However, the analysis of mimicry indicates that he also sees himself as *outranking* it. That is, he views it from the perspective of the esoteric (*das Esoterische*), that is, *down from above* (*von Oben herab*) (*BGE* 30). Nietzsche points to this higher-ranking perspective at the end of the first treatise. He writes: "One could even say that for now [the struggle between noble and slave modes of valuation] has been borne ever higher up and thereby become ever deeper, ever more spiritual: so that today there is perhaps no more decisive sign of the 'higher nature,' of the more spiritual nature, than to be conflicted in that sense and to still be a genuine battleground of that struggle" (*I* 16). Here, Nietzsche indicates that the conflict between noble values and slave values takes place not just between individuals or groups but also within individual souls. But, as Wood (2021, 139) points out, Nietzsche also implies that those individuals who are a "genuine battleground of that struggle" are *superior* (because "higher" and "more spiritual") to those who remain either merely *slaves* or merely *nobles*. The superiority of the "'higher nature,' of the more spiritual nature," rests in its ability to hold both perspectives at once and thus to achieve a more comprehensive view of the whole (cf. *GM III* 12).¹⁰ Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry reveals this more comprehensive view insofar as it clarifies the limitations and possibilities of *both* valuations.

MIMESIS AND MIMICRY

There are two scholarly approaches to the role that mimicry plays in Nietzsche's thought. The first and most common approach focuses on "mimesis," a diffuse and polymorphous concept that can refer to the various ways in which art imitates nature. The second focuses on mimicry, the antipredator adaptation strategy whereby one organism evolves to resemble another

organism from a different species. While the first approach typically treats "mimicry" and "mimesis" as interchangeable concepts, the second treats mimicry specifically in terms of evolutionary biology, and is interested in how Nietzsche translates mimicry from animal behavior to human psychology.

Scholars who take the first approach have variously argued that Nietzsche theorizes representational mimesis (Drost 1986; Forrer 2016; Gebauer 2010), or psychological mimesis (Girard 1976; 1988; 1994; Lawtoo 2013), or even ontological mimesis (Kronick 1997; Lacoue-Labarthe 1975; 1986; Siemens 2001). These scholars help to reveal the ambivalence of Nietzsche's master/slave binary by showing how he, at times, endorses the slave values he elsewhere so forcefully condemns.¹¹ However, according to the mimetic reading, Nietzsche never successfully moves beyond this ambivalence. His thinking—whether consciously or unconsciously—only ever oscillates between noble and slave perspectives.¹² In contradistinction to the mimetic approach, I argue that Nietzsche's ambivalence points to a perspective that transcends both noble and slave—namely that of the philosopher or knower. Focusing on mimicry, as opposed to mimesis, clarifies Nietzsche's philosophic perspective: he uses mimicry to criticize the noble, but that critique does not align him with the slave. Rather it serves the knower. For the analysis of mimicry ultimately reveals how power can distort our perception of the world and thus limit knowledge.¹³

In contrast to those studies that seek to situate Nietzsche in a broader framework of mimetic theory, I argue—along with Stack (1983) and Cha (2010; 2011)—that mimicry for Nietzsche refers specifically to a strategy of antipredator adaptation. That Nietzsche views mimicry as a strategy distinct from mimesis is indicated by his use of the English word, "mimicry," as opposed to the German *Nachahmung*. Furthermore, Nietzsche's usage explicitly refers to the process whereby one organism (the mimic) gains an evolutionary advantage through superficially resembling another (the model).

Stack perceptively analyzes mimicry in Nietzsche's *Daybreak*, arguing that, in Nietzsche's view, the strong (i.e., the "nobles") are the models that are mimicked by the weak (i.e., the "slaves") (Stack 1983, 178). In this article, I follow Stack's focus on the ways in which the weak mimic the strong in order to ensure their survival. However, Stack's analysis—partially because it looks only at *Daybreak*—fails to capture the full scope of Nietzsche's understanding of that process, insofar as it

⁸ Nietzsche's use of the creditor–debtor relationship in *GM II* indicates that he is concerned exclusively with the relationship between nobles. The exchange between creditor and debtor is one of rights and obligations and thus an exchange between *relative equals* (cf. *GM II* 8) rather than superior and inferior. *GM II* analyzes the order of rank *within* the noble caste. See also Meredith (2021).

⁹ This argument builds on my previous research (Meredith 2021). I argue that Nietzsche introduces the figure of the sovereign individual in the second treatise to correct the first's portrayal of the noble as fully autonomous and to reestablish the continuity between noble morality and slave morality. That figure, I contend, is the noble in its *Urform*: not only does the capacity for self-denial or self-sacrifice first emerge with that figure but also the constellation of virtues that Nietzsche designates as noble—loyalty or trustworthiness, magnanimity, the shame of good reputation, and reverence (239).

¹⁰ In *BGE* 260, Nietzsche also identifies as superior those individuals in whom the noble and slave modes of valuation coexist: "[In] all higher and mixed cultures there even appear attempts at the mediation of both moralities, still more often the entangling and mutual misunderstanding of both, indeed occasionally their close coexistence—even in the same human being, within a single soul."

¹¹ For nonmimetic accounts of Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude toward noble and slave see Deleuze (1983), Janaway (2007), Ridley (1998), and Staten (1990).

¹² Girard (1994) and Lawtoo (2013).

¹³ This approach builds on Meier (2019, 76–81), who argues that Nietzsche introduces the will to power doctrine not only as a tool for explanation but also for critical self-reflection. According to Meier, the explanatory function of the will to power is ultimately subordinate to its function as an instrument of the philosopher's self-knowledge, specifically as a means for clarifying the latent motivations and goals of his own thinking. See also his *Nietzsches Vermächtnis* (Meier 2021, 180–1).

emphasizes only the defensive aspect of mimicry. In contrast to Stack, and by extending my analysis to the other works in which mimicry appears, and in particular, to the *Genealogy*, I argue that Nietzsche also understands mimicry as an aggressive process, wherein the weak mimic the strong not only in order to survive the strong but also to dominate them. In this respect, I show how mimicry brings into focus Nietzsche's most pointed critique of the noble type: that the noble's strength is, in fact, a weakness.

Cha similarly emphasizes the aggressive character of mimicry in Nietzsche thought. According to Cha, Nietzsche establishes a connection between the evolution of mimicry and the emergence of the modern democratic order in order to reveal the latent will to power operating behind modern egalitarian movements. For Nietzsche, or so Cha argues, mimicry "is a biological drive of democratization *par excellence*" (Cha 2011, 134). In his reading, the capacity for empathy, which is presupposed by democracy, originates in mimicry, because the mimic must identify with the needs of the model. Thus, mimicry levels the differences between individuals. However, this suggests that the noble accepts the slave as an equal simply because the slave replicates the noble's behavior. In contrast, I argue that human mimicry for Nietzsche involves repetition *and* transformation. And it is through this repetitive-transformative process that the slave finds a foothold in the noble's psychology. Thus, whereas Cha portrays Nietzsche as critical of mimicry because of the way in which it subverts the rule of the noble, I argue that Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry implicates the noble in his own subversion, which, in turn, reveals Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude toward power.

Nietzschean Mimicry

Nietzsche's understanding of mimicry both borrows and breaks from the concept's origins in the natural sciences. His notion of mimicry seems taken, at least partially, from the then-emerging field of evolutionary biology. The twenty-first century definition of mimicry remains basically the same as that given by evolutionary biologists in Nietzsche's day: the process whereby "a defenseless creature finds relief from predators by assuming the pattern and coloring of one that is defended in some way, usually by inedibility" (Forbes 2009, 26). So, for example, nontoxic butterflies sometimes mimic the wing pattern and coloration of toxic butterflies—their shared appearance makes them *seem* to be a similarly noxious meal to their natural predators. Dissimulation—and simulation—are thus crucial features of mimicry.

Dissimulation (pretending to be what you are not) and simulation (mirroring or copying another) are also central to Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry. However, he breaks from evolutionary biology's understanding of mimicry in two key ways.¹⁴ First, he argues that

mimicry influences the development not only of human behavior but also of human values. It thus encompasses not only imitation but also assimilation—the process of absorbing the logic behind the model's customs and beliefs. Second, whereas evolutionary biology construes mimicry in largely defensive and so passive terms, Nietzsche thinks that mimicry can also be understood in terms of aggression; it can serve the goals of both self-preservation and domination.

More specifically, aphorism 26 of *Daybreak*, "Animals and morality," highlights Nietzsche's understanding of mimicry as a crucial self-preservation strategy for the weak. There he argues that one adapts to the "social morality" of one's place and time not only in order to evade the attention of "one's pursuers"—that is, the authorities responsible for enforcing moral norms and codes—but also to gain an advantage over "one's prey"—that is, those members of society who practice morality sincerely rather than strategically. Like animals, we learn to "control" and "disguise" ourselves in response to our environment. But whereas animals "adapt their colors to the color of their surroundings" or "adopt the forms and colors of another animal," we "conceal" ourselves "under the universality of the concept 'man' or under society" (*D* 26). That is, we mimic not just the forms and behaviors of other human beings but also their values. Such mimicry permits the individual to pursue his own advantage insofar as assimilation makes his interests and society's interests appear identical. Mimicry thus enables the individual to exploit custom to his own advantage.

The strategy of mimicry is thus the strategy of the weak, the strategy of those populations who, due to their relative lack of power, are forced to "go through their lives under changing pressure and coercion, in deep dependency" and so who are forced, in turn, to adjust their goals according to their resources and circumstances (*GS* 361 [1887]). Powerlessness, Nietzsche argues, disciplines the weak and, as a result, turns them into "masters" of "that incorporated and deep-rooted art of eternal art of hide-and-seek which in animals we call mimicry" (*GS* 361 [1887]). Furthermore, the dependent condition of the weak necessitates greater self-control as well as greater self-awareness (*D* 26). On the one hand, the survival of the weak depends on their ability to assess their effect on the strong, to know whether they are perceived as friend or foe, predator or prey. As a result, they are forced to look back upon themselves and consider themselves more objectively. In addition, the weak are, of necessity, more distrustful of their own passions. Mimicry, in other words, requires identification, analysis, and repurposing both of one's own and others' behaviors and codes. Thus, mimicry is a pedagogy for developing the intellect. It thereby makes the weak both smarter and more prudent than the strong.

Daybreak's aphorism 205, "Of the People of Israel," applies the analysis of mimicry outlined in *D* 26 to the question of Jewish assimilation in nineteenth century Europe, and further deepens that analysis by demonstrating mimicry's revolutionary potential. More

¹⁴ Cha argues that Nietzsche played a central role in the early debates over the presence of mimicry in human beings (2010, 142–4).

specifically, Nietzsche hypothesizes that European Jews' extended subjection to and mimicry of European nobility put them in a position to (1) understand European nobles better than they understood themselves, (2) excel European nobles in the practice of European nobility, and (3) use their knowledge and distinction to their own political advantage—namely, to conquer Europe without resorting to violence. In other words, Nietzsche shows how European Jews' subaltern positionality—and the mimicry it entailed—made them *more noble*, that is, more capable of self-mastery, than the European nobility (cf. *BGE* 250–1).

Nietzsche's description in *D* 205 of the Jewish experience of assimilation in Europe as an “eighteen century schooling” [*Schule von achtzehn Jahrhunderten*] and “apprenticeship” [*Übungszeit*] points back to the pedagogical function of mimicry highlighted in *D* 26. Europeans, he argues, spent two centuries attempting to make European Jews “contemptible” by “refusing them access to all honors, to everything honorable.” That is, Europeans tried to make European Jews contemptible by forcing them into a subaltern social position: making them pariahs by giving them access only to “dirtier trades” such as “usury.” However, Nietzsche argues, Europe's “procedure” of economically and socially excluding European Jews achieved just the opposite. For the Jews' subjugation ultimately proved to be a training in quintessential European virtues such as temperance [*Besonnenheit* and *Beharrlichkeit*], prudence [*Überlistung* and *Ausnützung*], and courage [*Tapferkeit* and *Heroismus*].

Every Jew has in the history of his fathers and grandfathers a treasure trove of examples of the coldest sobriety [*Besonnenheit*] and perseverance [*Beharrlichkeit*] in terrible situations, of subtle outwittingness [*Überlistung*] and exploitation [*Ausnützung*] of misfortune and chance; their bravery [*Tapferkeit*] under the cloak of miserable subjugation, their heroism [*Heroismus*] in *spernere se sperni* surpasses the virtues of all saints. (*D* 205)

As a result of their “apprenticeship,” that is, being forced to exercise greater self-control and rely on intelligence in “terrible situations” due to their relative weakness, European Jews could endure adversity *more nobly* than their “less talented” European counterparts. They are, Nietzsche reports, the least likely among Europeans to turn to drink or suicide “in order to escape a profound embarrassment [*Verlegenheit*].” Their ability to suffer shameful situations reflects a capacity for self-mastery that surpasses that of European nobles, whose “chivalrous noble sentiments” [*ritterlich vornehme Empfindungen*] led them to prefer death or oblivion to a tarnished reputation (cf. *D* 199). Unlike European nobles whose sense of self-esteem was determined by and thus dependent upon the opinion of their peers, European Jews could “spurn being spurned” (*spernere se sperni*), that is contemptuously reject European contempt, because “they believed themselves called to the highest things”—namely to the

“ancient God of the Jews.”¹⁵ In other words, the Jewish God provided the basis for an alternative hierarchy from which European Jews could condemn European contempt. God's good opinion as opposed to the good opinion of the European aristocracy mattered most. Jewish piety thus proved more noble than “chivalric” nobility because it entailed stricter forms of self-denial—namely enduring European persecution and pariahdom. The heroic suffering of European Jews then stems from the heroic act of self-dedication to something which they regarded as infinitely higher than themselves,¹⁶ a dedication that enabled them to subordinate their security and their vanity to their piety.¹⁷

European Jews not only became more proficient in European virtue than European nobles but also came to understand its underlying logic. Nietzsche highlights this aspect of the European-Jewish experience when he turns to consider the virtue of justice. “In addition to this, they understood how to create for themselves a feeling of power and of eternal revenge out of just those trades which one left to them (or to which one left them) (*D* 205).” Insight into the underlying logic of European justice—namely “requital” (*Wiedervergeltung*)¹⁸—enabled European Jews to exploit the dishonorable trade to which Europe had “left” them. “[O]ne must say even in defense of their usury that without this occasionally pleasant and useful torture of their contempters it would have been difficult to preserve respect for themselves for so long. For our self-respect is bound to our ability to exercise requital in matters good and bad” (*D* 205). In other words, European Jews transformed the “base” practice of moneylending into something “noble”—namely a means for “preserving” their feelings of pride and confidence under conditions of subjugation.

Furthermore, the experience of subjugation and the mimicry it entailed provided them with a more comprehensive education in justice than their aristocratic counterparts. “At the same time, they do not let their revenge get easily carried away: because they all have the openness of mind [*Freisinnigkeit*], also of soul, to which the frequent change of place, of climate, of customs of neighbors and oppressors educated [*erzieht*] them” (*D* 205). Itinerancy and the conditions of dependency it imposed moderated the Jews' desire for revenge because it educated them about the variability of geography, climate, and custom. Experiencing various ways of life tempered their attachment to any

¹⁵ This highlights one important respect in which European Jews do not assimilate, namely their faith in the Hebrew God. Yet, there are always aspects of nonassimilation in assimilation. In fact, my analysis below shows that the “holy” God is the primary way the slave not only mimicked but *transformed* noble morality. The “holy” God, like the God of the Jews, represents an intensification of noble values (such as self-sacrifice and self-mastery)—thus, it is both alien and familiar to the noble. So, for both the early Christians and the 19th-century Jews, religion involves a delicate balance between assimilation and transformation.

¹⁶ Strauss (1997, 323).

¹⁷ Compare Alfano (2019).

¹⁸ Compare *HH*, I 45 and 92; *WS* 22 and 33; *D* 112.

single way of life. They were thus less likely to demand satisfaction when customs were transgressed because they were not attached to one set of customs and beliefs. Ultimately, however, the experiences accrued from their subjugation profoundly intensified their capacity for self-mastery. “[T]hey possess by far the most experience in all human intercourse [*Verkehr*] and exercise [*üben*], even in passion, the caution [*Vorsicht*] of that experience” (*D* 205). European Jews had to exercise self-control “even in passion” because they were subject to so many conditions of limitation. Social adaptation, that is, mimicry and assimilation, thus necessarily develops the skill of self-mastery. Indeed, it requires the oppressed to exercise *greater* self-mastery than their oppressors.

Ultimately, Nietzsche hypothesizes, European Jews’ eighteenth century schooling in European virtue—their mimicry of and assimilation to European customs and beliefs—put them in a position to conquer Europe without recourse to violence. That schooling, as I have argued, not only enabled them to understand European nobles better than they understood themselves but also made them superior to their rivals in the skills of virtue and self-mastery. As a result, their assimilation includes the potential to transform Europe politically and culturally, that is, to supplant European rule with Jewish rule and, in turn, replace inferior European values and practices with superior Jewish ones (e.g., piety, familial honor, marriage customs).¹⁹ Nietzsche surmises that, even though European Jews lack the spiritual and bodily manners of European nobility, they will eventually come to inherit them as they “unavoidably” and “increasingly” intermarry with “the best of Europe’s nobility.” Indeed, through the process of intermarriage European Jews will eventually become so skilled in noble protocol that—as Europe’s “masters”—they will not even arouse “*shame*” in their European subjects. Precisely because of their excellence and superiority in nobility, Europe will not resent (and thus rebel against) but rather welcome and ultimately “rejoice” in their ascendancy. To make that ascendancy a reality, Nietzsche tells us, European Jews must, in the meantime, “distinguish themselves in every field of European distinction and stand among the first: until they are at the point at which they themselves determine what should distinguish” (*D* 205). Imitating and surpassing Europeans in their own aristocratic practices will put European Jews in a position to determine what counts as noble or honorable, that is, to transform Europe’s very understanding of nobility. Mimicry (in this case the repetition of European values and practices only with a difference) thus plays a central role in bringing about what Nietzsche describes in his later works as a “revaluation of values.”

At the same time, Nietzsche’s analysis of mimicry in *Daybreak* 26 and 205 highlights—if only implicitly—the deleterious effects of power for the powerful. Whereas

the dependent condition of the weak forces them to become both smarter and more prudent, the noble’s power has the opposite effect. He is not suspicious of the weak, because his power gives him no reason to fear them. Power makes him at once less prudent and less self-aware.²⁰ It is thus a weakness insofar as it causes the noble to be both more reckless in his behavior and more biased with regard to his own powers and abilities. The noble’s power makes him overconfident with respect to the weak and blinds him to the different kinds of power available to them. Physical and social or political power forestall the development of mental power.

Nietzsche makes explicit the inverse relationship between power and intelligence in *Twilight of the Idols*. There he argues that the weak are “*cleverer*” (*kliüger*) and “*possess more mind*” (*haben mehr Geist*) (*X* 14). This is because the weak need “mind,” which Nietzsche here defines as “prudence, patience, cunning, dissimulation, great self-control, and all that is mimicry,” in order to overcome the physical or sociopolitical disparity between themselves and the strong (*X* 14). Conversely, power makes the strong complacent—and so not only indifferent to the need for adaptation and novelty but also actively hostile to them (cf. *BGE* 260). The pride that the noble derives from his experience of superiority and the feelings of contempt that it generates impede his capacity to understand and so to adapt to the weak. In turn, his pride and contempt lead him unawares to disregard the potential threat posed by his adversaries. The strong cannot see the weak coming.

MIMICRY IN THE GENEALOGY

The above interpretation of Nietzsche’s analysis of mimicry helps resolve the paradox at the heart of the *Genealogy*—namely, how the weak “slave” was able to overcome the strong “noble.” For Nietzsche shows in the second treatise that by mimicking and, in turn, assimilating to the noble’s religious customs and practices, the slave comes to understand the key factors underlying the noble’s conscience: their desire for self-mastery or self-sacrifice, their vanity, and a belief in themselves as separate from nature.

Nietzsche’s examination of mimicry in the second treatise of the *Genealogy* arises in the context of his genealogy of conscience or, more specifically, “guilt consciousness” (*Schuldbewusstsein*), the feeling or awareness of indebtedness toward the ancestors (*GM* II 19–20). In Section 20, he argues that the transmission of guilt consciousness from the “blood-related organizational form of the ‘community’” to “the human race” results from the “subservience and mimicry” of the conquered slave and serf populations, that is, through the self-conscious assimilation of the conquered to the “cult of the gods” practiced by their conquerors. By mimicking and, in turn, assimilating to the moral and

¹⁹ “The way that [European Jews] honor their ancestors and offspring, the rationality of their marriages and marriage customs, distinguishes them amongst all Europeans” (*D* 205).

²⁰ Compare *D* 451.

religious customs and practices of the noble, the slave gains some purchase in their development, which suggests, in turn, that the slave helped to determine the development of guilt consciousness.

By pointing to the antipredator adaptation strategy of mimicry, Nietzsche simultaneously brings into focus his most pointed critique of the noble type—namely that the noble's "strength" or position of power blinds him to an advantage of "weakness." In clarifying the noble's weakness, Nietzsche, in turn, reveals the means by which the slave ultimately conquered the noble—namely mimicry, by understanding, learning from, and, in turn, exploiting the noble's conscience.

Noble Conscience and Its Weaknesses

Nietzsche's analysis in the *Genealogy's* second treatise reveals how certain aspects of the noble's conscience—their desire for self-sacrifice, their vanity, and a belief in themselves as separate from nature—ultimately made him susceptible to the transformative mimicry of the slave. More specifically, it shows how the slave repeats those aspects of the noble's conscience with a difference—namely by coupling them to Christianity's figure of the "holy" or self-sacrificing God (*GM II 22*). Nietzsche argues that it is through that figure—and that figure alone—that the weak were able to "entangle" conscience, inextricably, with the "concept of God." The result—Christian or "moralized bad conscience" (i.e., recognition of one's irredeemable guilt and thus eternal punishment)—mimics and, at the same time, *intensifies* the noble's conscience by attaching it to a being whose omnipotence utterly extinguishes the noble's own capacity for self-sacrifice.

Nietzsche's review of the *Genealogy* in his 1888 *Ecce Homo* provides a concise definition of conscience: "it is the instinct of cruelty which turns itself backwards after it can no longer discharge itself outwards" (III 'GM').²¹ In other words, conscience is self-directed cruelty—the capacity to deny the natural drives and instincts so as to be able to adhere consistently to a particular code of behavior; it is the internalization of the expectations of one's peers (cf. *GM II 2–3, 16–8*). Conscience then has its ultimate ground in cruelty. Cruelty is, for Nietzsche, a paradigmatic manifestation of the will to power—making suffer gratifies our will to power insofar as the spectacle of suffering provides evidence of our ability to overcome weaker, but still resistant, wills (cf. *GM II 5–6, 18* and *D 113*).²² Conscience is a refined form of cruelty insofar as it enables man to exercise his will to power on himself as opposed to others through the

practice of self-denial (cf. *GM II 2–3* and *16–8*; cf. also *D 29–30*). It is thus self-directed cruelty transformed into an ideal (*GM II 2*); it is cruelty refined and made into a virtue: into selflessness, into self-denial, into self-sacrifice (*GM II 18*).

Nietzsche's genealogy of conscience in the second treatise is at the same time a genealogy of vanity. Indeed, vanity is another name for conscience: a way of understanding oneself vis-à-vis the opinion of others. Furthermore, it reveals vanity as a core feature of the noble's psychology. His self-understanding is mediated by and so dependent upon the opinion of other nobles. Their esteem determines his standing within the community and in turn his sense of self-worth (*GM II 2*). Moreover, because the power equilibrium that grounds the noble community is in constant flux, he is of necessity preoccupied with maintaining his own reputation in the eyes of other nobles (cf. *GM II 8, 11* and *HAH 92*). He desires their respect and honor because it reflects and establishes for him certain degrees of power. Accordingly, the noble acts honorably because other nobles expect it and he conforms to those expectations because he wants and needs their honor and respect—because of his vanity.²³

These two features of conscience—self-mastery and vanity—lead the noble to see himself as separate not only from his own nature, but also nature itself. As Nietzsche shows in *GM II 2*, the noble takes pride in and thus gains satisfaction from his belief that he has complete control over his natural instincts and drives. But this pride has its basis in a prejudice as to what the will is, that is, what it is that makes possible his "self-mastery"—namely that will is somehow independent of or distinct from nature (cf. *D 31–3*). In turn, his self-conceit leads him to believe that his power over himself, his power to maintain the continuity of his will over time, necessarily entails "mastery over circumstances, over nature and all lesser-willed more reliable creatures" (*GM II 2*). He believes that he is apart from nature and therefore superior to it. Indeed, this prejudice grounds the noble's conception of virtue. As Nietzsche argues in *GM II 18*, to become conscious of the beautiful and the good and so of the "ideal," the noble first had to become conscious of the ugly and the evil and so of the "real" (Kaufmann 1974, 253). He thus had to negate his own nature in order to affirm or say yes to himself. Of course, the noble does not initially judge his own nature to be inherently defective or corrupt. Nevertheless, the contempt that he comes to feel for his natural instincts *makes possible* such an interpretation. The noble's excessive pride in his "self-mastery" opens a rift between himself and his own nature and that rift is the first step toward his downfall—which takes the form of slave morality or the moral interpretation of nature. The noble's self-conceit—his belief that he is apart from and therefore superior to nature—is the condition of possibility for

²¹ Conscience and what Nietzsche calls "'active' bad conscience" lie on a continuum and share more similarities than differences. For example, Nietzsche defines both primarily in terms of self-cruelty, namely the denial of one's basic instincts and drives (cf. *GM 2.1–3* and *16–8*). For similar interpretations see Meredith (2021) and Reginster (2011). Compare, however, Brusotti (2019), Ridley (1998), and Risse (2002).

²² Compare Reginster (2006, 139–147).

²³ Compare, however, Abbey (2000, 35–54).

the moral interpretation of nature and hence the triumph of the weak over the strong.

Transformative Mimicry

Through “transformative” mimicry, the weak are able to exaggerate weaknesses in the noble’s conscience and turn those weaknesses against him. Whereas Nietzsche presents conscience as a natural development in man’s evolution, as a necessary adaptation to his enclosure within society (*GM II 16*), he presents “moralized bad conscience” (i.e., the internalization of guilt) as a teaching of the weak. The noble comes to see himself as a sinner (and thus guilty) only because the weak taught him that his very nature makes him so. Nietzsche traces the root cause of this mimetic transformation—the transformation of conscience into moralized bad conscience—directly to the concept of the self-sacrificing God of Christianity. Nietzsche’s analyses of the Christian doctrines that stem from that concept of God—namely, original sin and redemption, clarify that transformation. Whereas the doctrine of original sin both affirms and denies the noble’s belief in his own self-sovereignty, the doctrine of redemption imitates—only in a more radical form—the noble’s desire for self-sacrifice.

The movement of Nietzsche’s analysis from the concept of the “maximum” god in *GM II 20* to the self-sacrificing God in *II 22* makes clear that the teaching of original sin rests entirely upon the idea of the self-sacrificing God. Nietzsche argues that the idea of the “maximum” or omnipotent god facilitates the further internalization of guilt. God’s omnipotence poses a problem for man insofar as the condition of his absolute power entails man’s absolute indebtedness to god. If man can no longer pay off his debts it follows that he can never be absolved of his guilt. He thus finds himself in a perpetual state of indebtedness and therefore in a state of irredeemable punishment: “the prospect of a conclusive redemption *shall* now pessimistically close itself off once and for all; the gaze *shall* now bleakly deflect off, deflect back from a brazen impossibility; those concepts ‘guilt’ and ‘duty’ *shall* now turn themselves backwards...” (*GM II 21*). God’s omnipotence thus entails an absolute command that, due to its very nature, can never be fulfilled. Man’s inherent powerlessness, his total inability to fulfill his obligations, leaves him with no other option than to completely internalize his guilt, to blame himself for his being powerless and thus susceptible to sin in the first place. As a result, bad conscience fixes itself firmly in the debtor, it “settles, eats into, spreads out, and grows polyp-like in every breadth and depth” (*GM II 21*). He thus finds himself in a perpetual state of guilt and therefore in a state of irredeemable punishment. Ultimately, man’s impotence refers his guilt back to the “creditor,” the “*causa prima* of man”: “one thinks here of the beginning of the human race, of its progenitor, who is now burdened with a curse (‘Adam,’ ‘Original Sin,’ ‘unfreedom of the will’)” (*GM II 21*). The weak “close off” the prospect of a “conclusive redemption” by tracing man’s sinful condition back to his origins, to

the ancestor of mankind, which in turn transforms that condition into a heritable trait.²⁴ Adam’s disobedience, his act of sin, corrupted human nature such that human beings permanently lost the ability to see the good clearly and to will it unselfishly (Urban 1995, 127). As a consequence of Adam’s sin, the human race inherits not only an inclination to sin but also inherits or shares in his guilt as well. Human beings are thus both sinful and guilty at their birth by virtue of their ancestry or heritage.

Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Christian doctrine of sin (“‘Adam,’ ‘Original Sin,’ ‘unfreedom of the will’”) in *GM II 21* points to the role of the weak in the development of human guilt consciousness. In particular, it points to the weak’s understanding of the psychology of the noble type and how that understanding allows the weak to exploit (by repeating with a difference) the noble’s conscience. The weak find in the noble’s conscience a basis in the noble’s soul for making the latter hold himself responsible for his actions just as the weak hold him responsible for them. The weak affirm the noble’s belief that he is responsible for his actions, but they teach the noble that those actions are necessarily sinful insofar as they emanate from an irretrievably corrupt human nature. Sin is not simply this or that wrongful deed and so something that can be removed through the exercise of self-control. Rather, sin is the wrong orientation of the whole of human existence since Adam’s fall, from which no one can free themselves (Lohse 1963, 118). Sin thus cripples the human will insofar as it is something man does with his whole being. As Martin Luther puts it: “In the Scriptures ‘sin’ means not only the outward works of the body, but also everything which stirs and moves within it when the outward deeds occur—namely the inmost heart with all its powers, so that the word ‘do’ should mean: when man falls entirely into sin” (Luther 1931, 7). Sin is therefore inevitable, and despite—or rather because of—its inevitability, man remains responsible for it. The Christian doctrine of sin thus mimics the noble’s belief in the sovereignty of his will by affirming it. It teaches him that he has responsibility for sin and so insists that he has the power to do otherwise. At the same time, the doctrine of sin transforms that belief by (paradoxically) denying his sovereignty. It teaches the inevitability of human wrongdoing and so insists on man’s powerlessness before sin.

Yet Christianity also offers to the noble a seductive escape. Nietzsche argues that the noble was tempted not only by the Christian doctrine of sin but even more so by its teaching on redemption, specifically by its presentation of the self-sacrificing God. That presentation mimics—only in a more extreme form—the noble’s desire for self-sacrifice. The Christian doctrine of sin raises a fundamental problem for man: eternal guilt condemns him to eternal punishment. Therefore, Nietzsche argues, the only possible solution is Christianity’s solution, “*Christianity’s* stroke of genius: God

²⁴ Calvin, for example, refers to Original Sin as “hereditary depravity” ([1559] 1846, 217).

sacrificing himself for the guilt of man" (*GM II 21*). Because man's nature is irretrievably sinful, he is totally incapable of the absolute obedience demanded by God, making it such that only God can save man from his sinful condition. Therefore, God must have mercy on man; only He can save man from himself.

Whereas the Christian doctrine of sin plays on the noble's self-conceit regarding his own sovereignty, the Christian notion of the sacrificial God capitalizes on the noble's idealization of self-sacrifice. Nietzsche shows throughout the second treatise that the psychology of nobility is rooted in a specific form of will to power—namely in the instinct for cruelty. The chief focus of the second treatise is the adaptation of that will to the novel conditions of society—how the instinct for cruelty turned back against itself when it could no longer discharge itself outwards (*GM II 16*). And, as he showed in Section 18, the product of that redirected cruelty was the ideal of selflessness, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. The means by which the noble came to discharge his power was, in other words, through exercising power over himself, through self-denial, that is, the denial of his own most basic instincts and drives. The noble's new standard of value, the ideal of autonomy or complete self-mastery, thus has its ultimate grounds in the will to power—in the desire to inflict cruelty on oneself, to deny oneself, so as to demonstrate one's power over oneself (cf. *D 113* and *GM II 2*).

The figure of the self-sacrificing God returns to precisely these themes—to the instinct for cruelty, to self-sacrifice, as a paradoxical expression of the will to power. These themes, in turn, point back to the figure of the sovereign individual, to the noble type *par excellence*, and to its adherence to moralities of honor (*GM II 2*). Thus, Nietzsche demonstrates precisely what it was about slave morality that so tempted the noble: the mystery of the self-sacrificing divinity, the enormity of that god's self-denial and the unimaginable power it reveals.

Section 8 of the *Genealogy's* first treatise hints at this aspect of the noble's religious and, ultimately, moral conversion. There Nietzsche suggests that it was the symbol of the 'holy cross,' that gruesome paradox of a 'god on the cross,' that seduced the noble and, in turn, "triumphed over all other ideals, over all *more noble ideals*" (*GM I 8*). The second treatise clarifies that puzzling suggestion by showing that what attracts the noble to the self-sacrificing God, in particular, is His will to power, specifically the degree of self-mastery or self-rule displayed in His self-sacrifice "*for the salvation of man.*" The noble was able to recognize himself in that "unthinkable, final, extreme cruelty and self-crucifixion of God" (*GM I 8*), in the strength of will and the capacity for self-constraint required by such an act—in its proof of power. He was, in turn, able to honor himself, his own strength and joy in ruling, in the self-sacrifice of the Christian God. The figure of the Christian God thus represents for Nietzsche *an intensification of the sovereign individual*, its most extreme configuration—a being whose omnipotence makes him *truly* sovereign (*GM II 2*).

Section 21 thus expands in detail on the passing mention of mimicry in Section 20. It expands on that theme by showing how one of the Christian God's main features harmonizes with the noble's psyche—namely his will to power or his desire to demonstrate his power through self-sacrifice. That harmony is, of course, no coincidence for Nietzsche. Rather it points back to the agency of the weak—to those subjugated populations who "by force" or "by mimicry" "assimilated themselves to the cult of the gods practiced by their lords" (*GM II 20*). For, Nietzsche's analysis suggests, in assimilating themselves to the cult of gods practiced by the noble, the weak came to *understand* the noble's deepest motivations, his most basic psychological needs and desires. The weak, in turn, used that understanding to exploit those needs and desires by appealing to a different yet fundamentally similar conception of divinity that was deeply attractive to the noble. That is to say, according to Nietzsche's revised thesis in the second treatise, the slave triumphed over the noble by way of mimicry and assimilation. By interpreting and understanding the underlying logic of the noble's customs and beliefs, the priest was able to erect a new ideal that appealed to the noble type in the form of a novel—but also familiar—divinity.

The second treatise thereby revises and clarifies the argument of the first. For whereas the genealogy of the first treatise culminates in the analysis of the "just God," the genealogy of the second culminates in the analysis of the "holy God." The first treatise largely ignores the problem of noble morality. One consequence of that neglect is that Nietzsche's analysis cannot satisfactorily explain the noble's conversion to slave morality. Insofar as it ignores the question of noble morality, it also ignores the psychology which serves as the basis of that morality. By focusing exclusively on the concept of the "just God," Nietzsche sought to emphasize those features of Christianity which appealed specifically to the slave, in particular the promise that God will reward the good deeds of the righteous with eternal salvation and punish the evil deeds of the wicked with eternal damnation. In the second treatise, however, Nietzsche aims to bring out those features of the Christian God that appealed specifically to the noble. Whereas the concept of the just God emphasizes free will and the promise of future rewards and punishments, the concept of the holy God radically deemphasizes free will and so also future compensation for righteous or wicked deeds. Rather than emphasizing the future condition of man—his salvation or damnation—the concept of the holy God emphasizes his present condition—namely his condition of irremediable sin and so also of human guilt before God. And it is precisely this thought—the thought of "Guilt before God"—that enticed the noble by providing him with a novel, and ultimately even more extreme, way in which to exercise his will to power on himself (*GM II 22*). Through *that* thought, the weak found a way to replace the noble's dependence upon the authority of beings with whom he shares approximately equal power, that is, other

nobles, with a dependence upon the authority of an omnipotent being.

Moralized bad conscience thus represents a *permutation* or *transformation* of the noble's conscience; it is both a reinterpretation and intensification of that conscience and, in particular, an intensification of the practice of self-tyranny. Moralized bad conscience is distinguished from conscience insofar as it calls for complete and total self-abnegation. It requires, in other words, that man recognize and affirm his "absolute unworthiness" (*GM II 22*). But, Nietzsche argues, even this radical act of self-denial works in the service of the self or ego insofar as the very act of self-denial gratifies the will to power. By denying himself to such an extreme degree the "man of bad conscience"—namely the weak, demonstrate, at the same time, an extremity of power, one that outstrips even the noble in terms of his capacity for selflessness, for self-denial, for self-sacrifice (cf. *GM II 18* and *BGE 52*). The weak thus demonstrate their superiority over the noble through the most radical version of self-mastery, through a more radical form of asceticism—namely through the total negation of the self.

Conclusion: Nietzsche's Critique of Power

Mimicry reveals Nietzsche's ambiguous valuation of power. For it shows that power (particularly hierarchical power over others) can be a weakness and weakness (i.e., subordination) can be a strength. Strength breeds overconfidence in the powerful, which, in turn, makes them less aware both of themselves and of the weak. It thus "stupefies" the powerful, blinding them to the potential threats posed by the powerless. In contrast, the weak are forced to know the strong better than they know themselves. Mimicry is the source of that knowledge; it is both an abstract knowledge that requires an understanding of the logic of the model's customs and beliefs, and an embodied knowledge that is manifested in performance.

Once we see Nietzsche as a critic as well as a proponent of power, he becomes an unexpected interlocutor for those scholars who seek to redefine and redeploy power for egalitarian ends. Putting Nietzsche into conversation with feminist writers like Rebecca Solnit and liberation theorists like W. E. B. Du Bois and Audre Lorde not only challenges and reinforces these thinkers' arguments but it also highlights Nietzsche's relevance for contemporary theories of social change.

Nietzsche is clearly antidemocratic, which makes his philosophical project and political aims very different from those of Solnit, Du Bois, and Lorde, who are interested in more fully realizing democratic principles of liberty and equality. But his analysis of mimicry presents a theory of social change that both complements and questions their egalitarian aims.

In showing how hierarchical structure shapes individual psychology, Nietzsche's arguments resonate with contemporary concerns about power and visibility. In her 2018 essay, "Nobody Knows," Rebecca Solnit similarly argues that knowledge is a structural feature of power. Using revelations from the #MeToo

movement, Solnit shows the various ways in which power engenders ignorance.

There's a large category of acts hidden from people with standing: the more you are the less you know...knowing the strategies that women use to be safe around men is, for men, optional, if they ever think about the issue in the first place. Every subordinate has a strategy for survival, which relies in part on secrecy; every unequal system preserves that secrecy and protects the powerful: better the sergeant not know how the privates tolerate him, the master not know that the staff have lives beyond servitude.

Solnit, like Nietzsche, argues that it is not an individual failing, but rather the asymmetry of power, which is primarily responsible for the ignorance of the powerful. Because the powerful occupy positions of power, they can simply ignore their impact on the powerless. The powerless do not require attention because they are perceived (consciously or unconsciously) as inferior and thus as inconsequential. This makes ignorance not only a possibility for, but rather a prerequisite of, the powerful. "It is an old truism that knowledge is power. The inverse—that power is often ignorance—is rarely discussed. The powerful swathe themselves in obliviousness in order to avoid the pain of others and their own relationship to that pain" (Solnit 2018, 5). To justify their exploitation, the powerful must find a way to ignore or "un-know" it—"to avoid the pain of others and their own relationship to that pain." Ignorance prevents the powerful from empathizing with the powerless, from recognizing them as "somebodies" who deserve respect rather than "nobodies" who warrant abuse.

Despite their similarities, Solnit's and Nietzsche's critiques of power have significantly different aims. Solnit's are clearly egalitarian. She argues that power is not "natural," but rather a function of conventional social position, and her critique thus aims at dismantling this arbitrary inequality. Nietzsche, by contrast, is less supportive of such efforts. Whereas Solnit suggests that exploitation is solely a function of a particular form of social organization, Nietzsche argues that exploitation is a function of life itself, that is, of all living organisms. "'Exploitation' does not belong to a spoiled or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as organic basic function, it is a consequence of the actual will to power, which is simply the will of life" (*BGE 259*; cf. also *GM 2.11*). In contrast to Solnit, Nietzsche argues that the dismantling of a particular social system does not undo inequality. Rather, it reflects the reorganization of forces and the reinstatement of new hierarchies.

Yet, Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry pushes back against his doctrinal statements about the value of hierarchy and power. On the one hand, it shows that not everything which enhances the noble's will to power is good (cf. *AC 2*). Power causes the powerful to overestimate their own abilities and, in turn, to be lulled into a false sense of security. On the other, mimicry shows that not everything which proceeds from weakness is bad (cf. *AC 2*). It reveals the weak's

ability to make a virtue of necessity, specifically using their subjugation to develop greater self-knowledge and self-control than is possessed by their subjugators; which suggests, in turn, that Nietzsche values power over oneself above power over others.

Mimicry helps to clarify these ambiguities of power. On the one hand, it defines more clearly Nietzsche's taxonomy of power. It not only draws a distinction between different kinds of power, such as power over others (e.g., the noble's rule over the slave) versus power over oneself (e.g., the self-mastery of the sovereign individual), but also between power's modes of expression—namely physical and psychological. On the other hand, mimicry helps to clarify Nietzsche's rank-ordering of the various kinds of power. His analysis of mimicry suggests that power over others is the most problematic, insofar as that kind of power “stupefies.” Power over oneself or self-mastery, by contrast, fosters prudence and self-awareness. This suggests that self-mastery is a less dangerous, more salutary, form of power. But self-mastery, in Nietzsche's analysis, can also lead back to the trap of political power. In *BGE* 257, Nietzsche traces the noble's dominance back to his “psychical” (*seelischen*) rather than his physical (*physischen*) power. The noble or “barbarian” castes came to control others because they could first control themselves. He similarly argues the capacity for self-control distinguishes the sovereign individual from nonsovereign individuals, and is what enables the former to rule over the latter (*GM* II 2). But, as the analysis of mimicry shows, achieving power and dominance over others comes with significant costs. Mimicry thus serves a cautionary tale about self-mastery as a *means* to power over others; what is to prevent the mimic, once he or she achieves dominance, from becoming “stupefied” in turn?

Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry not only reveals how power limits the powerful but also how the subjugated can use their position to gain power. His argument that the noble willingly submits to slave values challenges liberationist accounts which argue that revolution requires a radical break with the past. Lorde, for example, famously argues that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” ([1979] 2007, 12). This suggests that a political revolution requires a complete break from old systems, processes, and values (Grattan 2017, 46–52; Hanagan 2019, 122, 138; Turner 2021a, 245; 2021b, 569). According to Lorde, the values and practices of a regime—it's “tools”—are fundamentally bound up with, and inseparable from, its perpetuation. Thus, abolishing oppressive regimes of racism and patriarchy in the United States requires the root and branch rejection of the discriminatory values and practices of that regime. Nietzsche's examination of mimicry challenges this liberationist account insofar as it suggests that revolution or, in a more Nietzschean idiom, revaluation, necessarily appropriates and redeploys the oppressor's values. To overcome is to repeat with a difference (cf. *GM* II 12). Nietzsche's revised account of the “slave revolt in morality” in the second treatise thus questions the radicalness of “revolution” insofar as it suggests that revolution is elliptical rather

than linear: *revolution* is a move backward as well as forward. Christianity does not abolish the cruelty enshrined in the values of its Greek and Roman predecessors. Rather it reinterprets and redeploys cruelty in ways that sometimes ameliorate, and sometimes intensify, its applications.

While Nietzsche's analysis of mimicry challenges Lorde's theory of revolution, it anticipates and reinforces Dubois's claims about the advantages of the oppressed. For example, Nietzsche's claim that the weak know the powerful better than they know themselves foreshadows Du Bois's ([1903] 1997) notion of “second sight,” which suggests that Black Americans have the advantage of understanding whites better than they understand themselves (cf. Balfour 2010; Gooding-Williams 2009; Mariotti 2009; Mills 2017; Taylor 2021; cf. also Du Bois [1920] 1999). Nietzsche's claims about the special insights of the disempowered supplement Du Bois' theories by suggesting that those insights can be deployed *against* white attitudes and beliefs that sustain racial hierarchy and *for* egalitarian ones that undermine it. Nietzsche's analysis suggests that the practical aspect of revaluation—that is, converting souls—requires a form of persuasion grounded in the psychology of the to-be-converted. In other words, it involves the manufacturing of consent—convincing the powerholders, by using *their own values and beliefs*, that an alternative system is better.

Brought together, Nietzsche's and Du Bois' respective theories also supplement recent cross-disciplinary debates about “epistemic injustice”—that is, “forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices” (Kidd, Medina, and Polhaus 2017, 1). Scholars engaged in attempting to combat epistemic injustice focus almost exclusively on some form of pedagogical intervention—that is, *enlightening* those who are powerful but ignorant via appeals to justice or morality (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012; Mihai 2018; Mills 1997; 2017). Yet these scholars also recognize that powerholders have a material interest in their own epistemic ignorance insofar as it (their ignorance) safeguards their power (Medina 2012; Mihai 2018; Mills 2017). It is therefore unlikely that appeals to justice and morality *alone* can convince the powerful of their own willful ignorance. George Schulman makes this point, arguing that, “at issue is not white ignorance of racial domination but a refusal to *acknowledge* (and so to act on) what they *know*” (2008, 719). In other words, simple enlightenment is not enough. Instead, the disempowered must convince the powerful that yet more power (of some kind) lies in their conversion. Nietzsche uses Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, to make this point. Constantine saw in Christianity a means to greater earthly power. Nietzsche, however, suggests that Christianity conquered *him*: “*sub hoc signo* [‘under this sign’ (i.e., the holy cross)] Israel... has triumphed...over all *more noble* ideals” (*GM* I 8). The promise of power implicit in the symbol of God's self-sacrifice *seduced* Constantine into adopting Christian values. Nietzsche's analysis thus suggests that, rather than focusing solely on ameliorating the

epistemic ignorance of the powerful, attention should be paid also to the epistemic privilege of the disempowered—namely knowing the powerful better than they know themselves. Exploiting that knowledge might yield the means for *seducing* the dominant into a willing divestiture of power.

Ultimately, Nietzsche does not share the egalitarian projects of Lorde, Du Bois, or Solnit. His critique of power, by contrast, highlights the need to distance oneself from power and thus to a perspective that transcends that of the slave *and* the noble, each of which aims at increasing their own power. That critique points instead to the philosophic perspective, which strives to understand the world as it is rather than transform it into something it ought to be. The critique of power thus helps us to better understand Nietzsche's own thoughts. For it shows that Nietzsche takes a far more critical view of the noble type and of nobility than has been previously recognized. This more critical view of the noble has serious implications for how we think about Nietzsche's approach to political philosophy insofar as it raises fundamental questions not only about the feasibility of Nietzsche's call for a new politics of nobility, but also its desirability. Power breeds complacency in the powerful and so contains the seeds of its own demise. More directly, power stupefies. It thus becomes a barrier to knowing the world, knowing others, and, perhaps most importantly, knowing oneself. We, therefore, have good reason to doubt that Nietzsche, a self-proclaimed "knower" (*GM* Preface 1) who identified his *ruling* passion as the "passion for knowledge" (cf. *D* 429 and *AC* 54), would elevate power to the highest value.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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