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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to the faculty of Humanities 10, the course out of which this paper was born, and to Ilana, a teaching fellow who edited initial drafts of the paper. I am also tremendously grateful to my parents and family, who have always encouraged me to read widely and think deeply.

Philosophers and Priests: Nietzsche's Engagement with Vedanta and his Problematic Confusions in *On the Genealogy of Morals*

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Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* seeks to deconstruct the seepage of slave morality, arising in and of Christian dogma, in the quotidian lives of people. A manifestation of slave morality is the motivation for people to imbibe or support an "ascetic ideal," which consists of poverty, humility, and chastity. Nietzsche devotes one of his three treatises in *On the Genealogy of Morals* to explicating the ascetic ideal, presumptively in order to draw attention to the evils of slave morality. Nietzsche adopts a unique approach to this explication. Rather than to draw attention to the suffering of people victimized by the ascetic priest, he embarks upon a roundabout path to distinguish between the ascetic in general and the unaffected, rational philosopher, whom he sees as the priest's foil. Nietzsche argues that the philosopher is also ascetic in some ways, but that the asceticism of the priest and the philosopher differ in important ways. He then introduces Vedanta philosophy in order to clarify this distinction. However, in misappropriating Vedanta philosophy, Nietzsche inadvertently makes his philosopher complicit with the very ascetic ideal he condemns. His characterization of the Vedanta ascetic is intended to draw a stark contrast between the ascetic priest and the ascetic philosopher, but I argue that the Vedanta ascetic ultimately shares much more with Nietzsche's philosopher. This unintended complicity calls into question Nietzsche's cure for the ascetic ideal and slave morality more generally—atheistic, rational philosophy that exposes the oppression of religious structures—since it suggests that

ascetics and philosophers have similar dispositions, methods, and goals. This paper explores various sources in conversation with Nietzsche that support this suggestion, in the end arguing that on the whole, Nietzsche's misappropriation of Vedanta asceticism and philosophy is both polemical and damaging to his rhetorical case against the ascetic ideal.

Keywords: Philosophy, religion, Nietzsche, priests, ascetic ideal, morality, Vedanta

Among other societal issues, Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* seeks to deconstruct the seepage of slave morality, arising in and of Christian dogma, in the quotidian lives of people. A requisite of slave morality is the motivation for people to imbibe or support an "ascetic ideal." Nietzsche devotes one of his three treatises in *On the Genealogy of Morals* to explicating this ascetic ideal, presumptively in order to draw attention to the evils of slave morality, which he condemns. Nietzsche adopts a unique approach to this explication. Rather than to draw attention to the suffering of people victimized by the institutionally ascetic priest, he embarks on a roundabout path to distinguish between the ascetic in general and the unaffected, rational philosopher, whom he sees as the priest's foil. He then introduces Vedanta philosophy in order to clarify this distinction. However, in misappropriating Vedanta philosophy, Nietzsche inadvertently makes his philosopher complicit with the very ascetic ideal he condemns. This unintended complicity calls into question Nietzsche's cure for the ascetic ideal and slave morality more generally—atheistic, rational philosophy that exposes the oppression of religious structures—since it suggests that ascetics and philosophers have similar dispositions, methods, and goals. On the whole, Nietzsche's misappropriation of Vedanta asceticism and philosophy is damaging to his rhetorical case against the ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche's title of the third treatise in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a pointed question: "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?" However, rather than address the question directly, sections seven through ten of the treatise paint an increasingly malleable picture of the ascetic ideal, eliciting initial skepticism as to how the ascetic ideal can be combatted as a single, monolithic entity. The ascetic ideal, Nietzsche posits first, belongs to the priest as the "principle instrument in the battle with slow pain and with boredom" (67). This initial negative figuring of the ascetic ideal leads the reader to believe that the ideal is an oppressive, perverted mechanism by which slave morality is perpetuated under religious illusion. However, the same passage illumines an insight into the slippery nature of this pointed question, even as Nietzsche sees it. "That ascetic ideal has meant so much to man," he writes (67, original emphasis). The qualifier "that" of the principle instrument would have us believe that there actually exists more than one ascetic ideal, perhaps others that are not so deserving of scorn. Indeed, the question appears two more times (at the opening of sections two and five), and each time, *ideals* appears in the plural. This intentional acknowledgement of the plurality of ascetic ideals gives Nietzsche the opportunity to conflate a *kind* of ascetic ideal with the philosophic one, while still deprecating the priestly ascetic ideal. Nietzsche even praises the ascetic ideals that allowed the philosopher Schopenhauer to "break free from a [worldly] torture" (74), positioning the two ideals not diametrically opposed to each other as suggested in the "philosopher as foil" premise, but linking them as mutually beneficial. "It is indisputable," Nietzsche writes further, "that for as long as there have been philosophers on earth...there has existed a characteristic philosophers' irritability and rancor against sensuality", which is a hallmark of the ascetic ideal (74). Are, then, the exalted philosophers simply ascetics under a guise? Why separate the ascetic ideal from the philosopher who contemplates it, if he must do so under its influence?

This espousal by philosophers of the priestly ascetic ideal is initially taken in stride as Nietzsche reduces it to a smart, convenient move on the part of the philosophers to avoid petty, worldly distraction. “The ascetic ideal points out so many bridges to *independence*...at the sight [of the ascetic ideal] the philosopher smiles at an optimum of the conditions for highest and boldest spirituality” (75). In other words, there exists a facet of the ascetic ideal that allows the philosopher the most legroom for his or her mental exercises—deemed, notably, *spirituality* (associated, primarily, with the arena of priests) in this context. The difference is that the philosopher’s asceticism, or detachment from “compulsion, disturbance, noise, business, duties, cares” in order to “roam above life” is “hard and lighthearted”, while the priest’s asceticism is life-negating (76, 79). The idea of the philosopher as merely a healthy embodiment of an ascetic ideal does not stop at this convenient espousal of a socially extant ideal, however. “A serious historical reckoning proves the tie between ascetic ideal and philosophy to be even closer and stricter still,” Nietzsche writes (79). Thus, moving away from the abstract entertaining of many definitions, he posits clearly that philosophy was actually borne of asceticism itself, that in the societal space cleaved out by asceticism, philosophy found its first fertile ground. The freedom of the will supplied by the “ascetic covering and mantle” made philosophy, as a discipline, possible. If it is the case, however, that philosophers adopt the ascetic ideal for their own purposes, and that philosophy finds its very genesis in the ascetic ideal, then this ascetic ideal conflicts with the premise of condemnation in which Nietzsche grounds his third treatise.

With philosophy tied inseparably to a facet of ascetic ideal, Nietzsche proceeds to discuss the philosopher’s onus for combatting the ascetic ideal, but the discrepancy between the two ideals remains in need of explanation. Mark Migotti interrogates this in his article *Sensuality and Its Discontents*. “So far, [Nietzsche’s] historical story shows only that philosophers had to exploit the

ascetic ideal to secure room for themselves in primitive conditions; it does not explain why they should become so enamored of it" (320). How can Nietzsche reconcile the radical difference between philosophers and priests with the abiding enthusiasm of philosophers for the ascetic ideal? According to Alexander Nehamas,¹ the asceticism of the philosopher is "naturalistic and egoistic," while the asceticism of the priest is "moralized" (321, quoted by Migotti). The mark of the philosopher is the prudent selectivity in securing pleasures which he or she values more highly, which is nothing but "self-control" (ibid.). On the other hand, the mark of the priest is the moralization of asceticism, and "the desire to avoid all human pleasures in general" (ibid.). For Nehamas's purposes, the crucial point is that "the philosopher's asceticism is practiced for the sake of a better present life," while the ascetic ideal is a vehicle for "denying the whole of life" (ibid.). However, this distinction fails to exonerate Nietzsche, since rather than to reconcile the two facets of the ascetic ideal, it qualifies each of them as separate perspectives as opposed to complementary strands of a single ideal. It is not problematic that the philosopher prudently chooses his pleasures, but rather that he or she is seen as complicit with the fundamental ascetic ideal which the priest shares. If this is the case, ought we take seriously what Nietzsche says about the priest at all? Does he simply ridicule the priest for the half-hearted, blithe exploitation of his ideal by the philosopher? Maudemarie Clark agrees,² arguing that Nietzsche does not actually mean what he says. Her reduction of the philosophers' complicity is that since philosophers "as such have no interest in turning their ascetic tendencies and habits into an ideal for all," there is no philosopher's ascetic ideal (ibid.). This argument, though convincing, hinges on the definition of an "ideal" as only communal or universal, and only registers the issue of how to integrate the rhetorical

¹ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*

² *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*

contradictions. It does not resolve them. We are left, still, with the paradox of the “philosopher’s ascetic ideal.”

It is in grappling with this paradox that Nietzsche introduces and misappropriates Vedanta philosophy. An unnamed and unqualified “Indian” philosopher makes a belated and perplexing appearance in the third treatise at the beginning of section twelve. In theorizing what a life-denying ascetic might philosophize about the world, Nietzsche writes that he or she would “demote physicality to an illusion” as “the ascetics of the Vedanta philosophy did” in order to justify his or her participation in the world (84). We can set aside the fact that Nietzsche presumes that some “Vedanta philosophy ascetics” are accurately representative of “Indian philosophers” (84) without qualifying the Indian philosopher *or* the Vedanta philosophy, and instead analyze his verbiage to probe at the core of his problematic conflation. A closer reading of this sudden, condescending mention of the “ascetics of the Vedanta philosophy” would have us believe that the ascetics themselves, in being the agents of the past tense verb ‘did’ (whose antecedent is ‘philosophize’) and belonging to a particular branch of philosophy, *are* the philosophers. The recurring theme echoed faintly here is flipped on its head. Here, rather than the philosophers upholding a certain ascetic ideal, the ascetics uphold a certain philosophic ideal. Of course, Nietzsche speaks of this camp of ascetics with derision (“to refuse to believe in oneself, to deny one’s own “reality”—what a triumph!”), but we cannot help but take seriously the possibility that Nietzsche’s continuous entangling and interchanging of the two is subconscious and inevitable, that it signals the same significant inconsonance in Nietzsche’s third treatise (84). If separating the two ideals of asceticism and philosophy returns irreconcilable contradictions, Nietzsche may be a victim of his own rhetoric; against his own will, his treatise could support the unity of the ascetic and philosophic ideal.

Since unity of these two ideals comes full circle in a brief mention of “the ascetics of the Vedanta philosophy,” we first consider the nature of the Vedanta ascetic ideal to test Nietzsche’s appropriation of Vedanta philosophy. According to Roger Marcaurelle, there are four basic kinds of renunciation³ within the framework of Advaita Vedanta, which is the body and system of thought from which Nietzsche draws.⁴ These include physical renunciation, where the object of renunciation consists of “visible activities or material things”; renunciation of the rewards of action, the object being “the results of action”; meditative renunciation, where the object is “either a wrong notion about the Self or a layer of mental activity”; and renunciation of doership, where the object consists of “the sense of being the doer of mental and physical actions” (15). The four types increase incrementally in spiritual worth (16). The feature of renunciation upon which Nietzsche focuses his attention, critique, and, vis-à-vis denying oneself pleasurable material objects, condemnation, is the first. However, the disclosure of the four basic kinds of renunciation, with the indication that they do not exist in a vacuum or without progression, lead us to contest the grounds upon which Nietzsche levels his evaluation of the Vedanta ascetic ideal. Consigning his partially pictured Vedanta asceticism to a redemption reminiscent, at best, of “deep sleep,” Nietzsche characterizes it, wrongly, as the only means to a higher end (96). Though it could be argued that Nietzsche figures the Vedanta ascetic ideal only partially because that is the extent of his knowledge on the subject, Nietzsche writes in a letter to Paul Deussen upon receiving a copy of his newly translated Śankara commentary:

Much had to come together in one man in order to be able to reveal such Vedanta doctrine to us Europeans...It is of great pleasure to me to once get to know the classical expression of the thought-form foreign to me. Your book achieves this...I read page for page with

³ Because Nietzsche’s characterization of asceticism in general reckons with the abstention and rejection of pleasures, it is most closely related to, and can even serve as a synonym for, renunciation, in nature and practice.

⁴ Nietzsche is referring to Paul Deussen’s translation of Adi Śankara’s commentary on the Brahma-sūtras (attributed originally to Bādārayana). Śankara’s commentary is considered the seminal text for Advaita Vedanta.

complete ‘malice’; you cannot wish for yourself a more thankful reader, dear friend. (Rollmann 128)

Thus, having read “page for page” Deussen’s text, Nietzsche cannot be exempted from the allegation that he purposefully obscures the Vedanta ascetic ideal in order to preempt any unifications of the ascetic priest and the philosopher as he colors them. His admission of having read the first text with malice aside, that Deussen’s *Die Sutras des Vedânta* and Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* were published in the same year (1887) hints at the possibility that Nietzsche intended for the texts to be in conversation.

Nietzsche’s justification for this complicity of the philosopher with the ascetic ideal is a weak, generalized difference in the manner in which the two camps leverage their faculties of knowing and feeling. To revisit a portion of the text, while ascetic priests reroute the emotional *ressentiment* of the masses back to the people themselves, perpetuating a “brooding over bad deeds and apparent curtailments” (92), philosophers extend their mental and physical faculties outward, “freeing [them] from compulsion, disturbance, noise, business, duties, [and] cares” (76). While priests “tear open the oldest wounds and bleed to death from scars long healed” (92), philosophers become “fully fledged, and roam more than rest above life” (76). Nietzsche juxtaposes opposites (“brooding” and “fully fledged,” “bleed to death” and “roam above life”) to capitalize on a dissimilarity in manner of existing, inwardly and outwardly, for priests and philosophers. But rather than mollify and overturn the complicity of the philosopher with the ascetic ideal by aggressively and dramatically separating them, these juxtapositions are polarizing generalizations—they make sweeping, unverifiable statements rather than supply specific evidence for their support. What does it mean to be “fully fledged,” and which certain philosopher accomplished this? Which priest did not? In previous instances, Nietzsche cites specific philosophers like Schopenhauer (74) to corroborate his claims, but here Nietzsche leaves it unclear,

and these phrases read as grandiose flourishes severely lacking in detail. Thus, the complicity of philosophers with the ascetic ideal in stated historical evidence and pointed lack of unambiguous, counterevidence again jeopardize Nietzsche's premise that the philosopher and the priest are foils.

We can further tease out the paradoxical unification of philosophers and the ascetic ideal by exposing the connections between types of Vedanta renunciation that Nietzsche purposely neglects to draw, despite employing them in his argument. In illuminating the full nature of the ascetic ideal through the Vedanta lens which, until now, has had its parts cherry-picked in the service of a narrow claim, we note powerful underlying similarities between philosophers and ascetic priests. A specific focus on the third type of renunciation, called meditative renunciation by Marcaurelle and characterized as the renunciation of "either a wrong notion about the Self or a layer of mental activity," suffices for the purpose of this analysis in revealing the ties between the philosopher and the ascetic (15). First, the renunciation of a "wrong notion about the Self" recalls a passage from the *Genealogy*: "[The philosopher] does not negate 'existence,' rather he affirms his existence and *only* his existence" (75). Renouncing wrong notions about the self and avowing a more essential existence—a compulsory criterion for philosophers, according to Nietzsche himself—are, at minimum, congruent, if not mutually implicit. Second, in citing Śankara's commentary, Marcaurelle writes, "Meditative renunciation allows the meditator...to experience the whole range of his or her individual self" (18). The *Genealogy* echoes this principle, as the philosopher "instinctively strives to attain its maximum in feeling" and searches for his or her "*most beautiful* fruitfulness" (75, 76). The whole range of the individual self in the former evokes the full flowering of the faculties of man in the latter. Third, Śankara's meditative ascetic sheds "the mental and physical limitations of the Self" and corrects the misapprehension of an ego characterized by these limitations (18), while Nietzsche's philosopher also "needs rest from *one*

thing before all else: from all “today” and “shies away from all-too-bright light” (77, 78). We may interpret “all today” to mean the burdens and confines of the material or conventional, and the “all-too-bright” as “fame” (78). Thus, the detachment from corporeal pleasure and prominence is analogous in both texts. Fourth, Śankara also emphasizes the meditative ascetic’s transcending of “fluctuations of ordinary pleasure and pain” (18). Nietzsche philosopher parallels this equanimity, as he “does not like to be disturbed by enmities, also not by friendships” (78). Finally, Marcaurelle rewards meditative renunciation with the pronouncement that it typically results in the “direct knowledge of the Self as infinite” (18). The philosopher characterized by Nietzsche is perhaps unrealized in this arena, but certainly the idea of “direct knowledge of the Self as infinite” is not far from the idea that the philosopher, in counteracting the redirection of *ressentiment* to people themselves, would prefer the pursuit of knowledge to the systematized guilt and abhorrence of self. These various close ties between the Vedanta ascetic and the Nietzschean philosopher indicate two facts. First, the complicity of the philosopher with the ascetic ideal runs deeper than immediately obvious, and second, Nietzsche’s appropriation of Vedanta philosopher in order to substantiate his claim that the philosopher and the ascetic are at odds is manipulative and incorrect.

We have yet to grapple overtly with the fact that in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche makes asceticism and institutionalized priesthood mutually inclusive, and that in criticizing his conflicting and incomplete portrayal of the Vedanta ascetic ideal on his own terms, we might inadvertently criticize his portrayal of the priest. However, this is not the case, since Vedanta is only strategically employed by to Nietzsche to illumine a select element of his ascetic ideal. Had Nietzsche colored an accurate picture of the Vedanta ascetic, we would have seen that the Vedanta ascetic is not necessarily also a priest. According to Marcaurelle, most Vedanta ascetics lived away from people and sought not to impose or universalize their ideals but to realize them fully for

personal benefit (130). This aligns closely with Clark's argument that the philosopher, in abstaining from imposing his version of the ascetic ideal, does *not* subscribe to the priestly ascetic ideal. By that logic, neither does the Vedanta ascetic, who, in fact, turns out by Nietzsche's own doing to share more characteristics with the philosopher. This only exacerbates Nietzsche's misappropriation, since he employs Vedanta asceticism to condemn the institutionalized, Christian priesthood⁵ prevalent in Germany at the time he was writing (502). His allusions to physicians and nurses distinctly recall this institutionalization of priesthood; "he stills the pain that the wound causes, he poisons the wound at the same time" implies that Nietzsche refers to an ascetic Christian priest to whom *another exists in relation*. If, however, the ascetic priest were alone and unimposing as the Vedanta ascetic is, there would be no other to solace or poison (90). The concurrence of the philosopher with the ascetic ideal, therefore, need not lighten the burden of the Christian priest in the charges laid against him by Nietzsche elsewhere. The Vedanta ascetic is a philosopher, to state the paradox of misappropriation simply, and Christian priesthood is a question outside the boundaries of an engagement with Vedanta.

Occidental philosophers have long since coopted and exploited the so-called "Oriental" schools and systems of thought to advance their own arguments; Friedrich Nietzsche inherits this tradition and does no less in the third treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Remiss of his inconsistent rhetoric, he carelessly introduces the philosophy and asceticism of Vedanta in order to resolve the contradiction that philosophers seem to acquire, or intentionally and happily manipulate, the ascetic ideal reserved for priests, despite his insistence that philosophers and priests are markedly different. A closer reading of the Vedanta philosophy and prescription for asceticism reveals that ascetics and philosophers are, in fact, more similar than Nietzsche had

⁵ *A History of Modern Germany*

perhaps warranted. The philosopher does not emulate the ascetic ideal and then cast it aside; the Vedanta philosopher's agenda and the Vedanta ascetic's agenda align closely in their pursuit for knowledge. Thus, Nietzsche's failure in the third treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morals* to properly characterize and distinguish Vedanta asceticism and Christian asceticism is a problematic indication of his misappropriation and rhetorical inconsonance.

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