

Ressentiment and Rationality

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an investigation of the condition of resentment. It reviews the two most prominent philosophic accounts of resentment: Nietzsche's genealogy of resentment as the moral perversion resulting from the ancient Roman/Palestinian cultural conflict and giving birth to the ascetic ideal; and Scheler's [phenomenology](#) of resentment as a complex affective unit generative of its own affects and values. A single sketch of the typical elements of resentment is drawn from the review of these two accounts. One element in particular, the exigency of [rationality](#), is highlighted. The rationality of resentment is found to be essential to the phenomenon as a whole and to its constitutive parts. Curiously, while their accounts imply and suggest the role of rationality, neither Nietzsche or Scheler make the centrality of rationality to resentment implicit.

Ressentiment is a state of repressed feeling and desire which becomes generative of values. The condition of resentment is complex both in its internal structure and in its relations to various dimensions of human existence. While it infects the heart of the individual, it is rooted in our relatedness with others. On the one hand, resentment is a dark, personal secret, which most of us would never reveal to others even if we could

acknowledge it ourselves. On the other hand, resentment has an undeniably public face. It can be creative of social practices, mores, and fashions; of scholarly attitudes, academic policies, educational initiatives; of political ideologies, institutions, and revolutions; of forms of religiosity and ascetic practices.

The concept of resentment was first developed systematically by Nietzsche in his account of the historical emergence of what he terms 'slave morality' and in his critique of the ascetic ideal. While references to this condition can be found throughout his works, the chief sections in which he develops this notion are in his early work [The Genealogy of Morals](#). Max Scheler provides an eidetic account of this complex affective phenomenon in his book entitled *Ressentiment*. The picture of resentment that emerges from these two thinkers is in part a function of their methodological approaches and their abiding philosophic interests. Nietzsche's historical approach to the development and the corruption of morality is empiricist and deterministic, but it does not have the marks of the narrow positivism that emerged later. His historical method is informed by his philological training in ancient Hellenic texts and by Enlightenment ideals. So, although Nietzsche writes of cultural conflicts in the ancient world as historical fact, he actually uses them as models with universal anthropological significance.

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