

## *Ressentiment*

Andrew Huddleston  
Birkbeck, University of London

DRAFT 20 April 2019

### Abstract:

In his *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche famously discusses a psychological condition he calls *ressentiment*, a form of toxic, vengeful anger. In this paper, I offer a free-standing theory in philosophical psychology of what is characteristic of this state. My view takes some inspiration from Nietzsche, but this paper will not be a work of exegesis. In the process of developing my account, I will try to chart the terrain around *ressentiment* and closely-related and sometimes overlapping states (ordinary moral resentment, envy, vengefulness, anger, and the like) and also seek to explain what's ethically objectionable as well as psychologically pernicious about *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, I shall contend in this paper, is not simply a ten dollar word substitutable for 'resentment,' though it is indeed a species of that genus. On the account I develop, the perception of being slighted, insulted, or demeaned figures centrally in cases of *ressentiment*.

### I. Introduction

On May 23, 2014 in Isla Vista, California, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger went on a shooting spree, killing six people and injuring fourteen others. Shortly before this murderous rampage, he uploaded a video manifesto to YouTube in which he outlined his motivations. In his twisted way, he thought it a cosmic injustice that sorority women were spurning him. He wanted revenge and took it in an indiscriminating fashion. A few years later, self-styled "white nationalists" marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting "you will not replace us"—the "you" referring to other racial groups perceived to be gaining power

and status that the white supremacists thought was rightfully theirs. One rammed his car into a group of counter-protesters. Sometimes, as in these cases, the toxic grievances issue in violent action, in outbursts of terrorism. Sometimes, as we see in a variety of forms in contemporary political life, these grievances influence one's voting. Sometimes they lead to posturing displays of power or to verbal tirades on Twitter. Sometimes hostility simmers in more subterranean ways, in passive-aggression and fantasies of revenge, without anything much being done.

We academics will be familiar with milder and less dangerous forms of a similar phenomenon: Those, for example, who feel (justly or unjustly) that they have gotten insufficient professional recognition and then stew in spiteful anger and spout their vitriol in the blogosphere, in barbed requests "simply for clarification" in q&a sessions, or behind the anonymity of cuttingly dismissive referee reports.

What is going on in these cases? Much will of course depend on the psychological specifics. We might describe these agents as beset with some combination of anger, vengefulness, envy, resentment. But there is also, I suggest, a more specific potential diagnosis we might want to avail ourselves of as well: namely, *ressentiment*.

The notion of *ressentiment* is of course most famously associated with Nietzsche, who made it a key element of his account in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche did not himself coin the term. Nor did he introduce the notion into philosophical discourse.<sup>1</sup> But he has perhaps done the most to bring it to the attention of philosophical readers today and to contribute to our understanding of the psychology underlying it. His efforts in this direction are, to my mind, one of his most important lasting contributions to philosophy. At the same

---

<sup>1</sup> It was in circulation before him in, for instance, the work of Dühring (1865).

time, Nietzsche's own analysis is closely bound up with his specific project of thinking about the genesis and ongoing influence of Judeo-Christian moral values. He thus is less interested in giving us a well-delineated theory of what the state in general is (suggestive though his remarks may be), than he is instead in charting its relation to this morality, as well as its role in forms of internalized self-cruelty. Moreover, since his interests lie with a consideration (and in large part an indictment) of this Judeo-Christian morality and its legacy, he focuses on the particular cases of *ressentiment* most relevant to this. In the process, he offers us telling examples of it, but they are arguably not the sole, or even the main cases of it. If we try to build a general theory of *ressentiment* just from these, we may be led astray. Specifically, we may be misled into thinking that *ressentiment* is only the reaction of those under conditions of systematic powerlessness and deprivation, or is a reaction which takes only repressed, subterranean channels. But that is too limiting. For it is also, I suggest here, sometimes the reaction of the comparatively well-off, particularly those with a sense of entitlement who feel they aren't getting their due. And it sometimes expresses itself in outward action and turns violent. Many of its most disturbing cases fall into this mould. It is potentially an attitude of oppressors as well as of the oppressed, of the powerful as well as the powerless, and of many ordinary folk who fall in between.

Given the notion's prevalence within Nietzsche's work, and relative neglect in anglophone moral philosophy, *ressentiment* has had its most extensive and philosophically-rich discussion within the orbit of Nietzsche interpretation. This paper will thus begin with Nietzsche, and engagement with the secondary literature on this issue. But it is not intended to be mainly interpretive in focus. I instead want to offer a free-standing theory in philosophical psychology of what is characteristic of this psychological condition. In the

process, I will try to chart the terrain around *ressentiment* and closely-related and sometimes overlapping states (ordinary moral resentment, envy, vengefulness, anger, and the like) and also seek to explain what's ethically objectionable as well as psychologically pernicious about *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, I shall contend in this paper, is not simply a ten dollar word substitutable for 'resentment,' though it is indeed a species of that genus. My account puts a particular emphasis on the perception that one has been slighted, insulted, or demeaned as at the heart of *ressentiment*. This, I will suggest, is at least as important in understanding *ressentiment* as powerlessness *per se* is. Yet the latter, thanks to Nietzsche's focus on the will to power, has tended to guide, indeed monopolize, discussions of *ressentiment*, in a way that misses a core dimension of the underlying psychology. Likewise, we will miss an important element that is distinctive (and conceptually useful) about *ressentiment* if we take the sole function of this notion to be simply *descriptive* or *explanatory*—telling us why an agent is having a certain reaction, and what role it plays in her psychic economy. *Ressentiment*, on the view I put forward, is always playing a key normative role as well; it serves to identify and censure a vice. In this way, it is akin to avarice, cowardice or boorishness. Whereas resentment is the genus, which has commendable and problematic manifestations, *ressentiment*, on my view, is an inherently vicious species of it. Some Nietzsche scholars, thinking they are taking their cue from the great 'immoralist' himself, bend over so far backwards to avoid being 'moralizing' with their treatment of *ressentiment* that they miss what, as I see it, is the core ethical function of this concept, which is not simply to characterize people, but to condemn them as well. My own account is thus unabashedly ethical in flavor. Yet however exactly what understand this state of *ressentiment*, it is an important and theoretically interesting sub-category that deserves more attention in moral

psychology than it gets. This paper is an attempt to bring it to the table for further discussion in anglophone philosophy.

## **II. Nietzsche on *Ressentiment***

Although there are hints of the idea in earlier work, *ressentiment* is most extensively explored in the first essay of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and then different manifestations of *ressentiment* are treated in both of that book's two subsequent essays.<sup>2</sup> One of Nietzsche's key claims is that *ressentiment* is the engine of the so-called "slave revolt" (GM, I:10), marking the transformation from a Greco-Roman warrior ethic centered around the notions of "good" and "bad" to a Judeo-Christian morality centered on the notions of "good" and "evil." My interest in this paper is not in the role *ressentiment* is supposed to have played in creating or sustaining Judeo-Christian moral values, nor is it in the potential relevance of *ressentiment* to a critical evaluation of such values.<sup>3</sup> These matters raise considerable complexities, both exegetical and philosophical. I instead want to try to better understand how we might think about this psychological state itself. What is *ressentiment*?

I shall begin by looking at what interpreters in the secondary literature have taken Nietzsche to mean by this. Most agree that it is referring to a specific mixture of hatred and vengeance.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned already, this is not simply a term of Nietzsche's invention. It is a French word, but one that was in circulation among educated German speakers since the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Abbey (1999) for a discussion of its anticipations.

<sup>3</sup> See Bittner (1993); Reginster (1997); Wallace (2007); Poellner (2011) for a discussion of these issues.

<sup>4</sup> For a representative range of readings, see Williams (1993); Bittner (1993); Richardson (1996); Reginster (1997); May (1999); Risse (2003); Janaway (2007); Poellner (2011); Anderson (2011); Leiter (2014); Clark (2015); Katsafanas (2016); Elgat (2017); Reginster (Forthcoming).

17th century.<sup>5</sup> It was under philosophical discussion in the period right before Nietzsche. Eugen Dühring, a philosopher popular in the 19th century and now mostly forgotten, but read, cited, and used as a foil by Nietzsche, makes use of the term. Dühring takes *ressentiment* to be an impulse to retaliate against those we take to have done us some injury.<sup>6</sup> He seeks to explain how this feeling of *ressentiment* is in fact the source of justice, a project Nietzsche finds dubious (GM, II:11).

Though *ressentiment* may not be a term of Nietzsche's own invention, some scholars read it as basically a term of Nietzschean art, in such a way that it becomes very closely tied to the features of the particular examples that Nietzsche probes. Simon May, for instance, seeks to characterize Nietzschean *ressentiment* and to distinguish it from ordinary moral resentment by three features. *Ressentiment*, as May interprets it, is, first of all, "universal in scope," meaning that it takes not just the isolated actions of others as its object, but all of existence. Second, *ressentiment* falsifies the object of the attitude. And, third, the revenge associated with *ressentiment* is merely imaginary.<sup>7</sup> May is correct, I suspect, in saying that these three features *can* be notable aspects of *ressentiment* and are central to some of Nietzsche's examples. And he is also helpful in reminding us that *ressentiment*, for Nietzsche, is not just an interpersonal matter of animus directed at some person or group; it might take God, time, or existence as its object as well. May's account is moreover insightful in getting

---

<sup>5</sup> There is some degree of disagreement on the precise details here. See Kaufmann (1950), Bittner (1993), and Risse (2003). Risse notes: "Although 'ressentiment' is a French word (and thus missing from the Grimms' dictionary), the German educated elite had used it since the 17th century. The word was presumably adopted because German lacks a good word for the English 'resentment' and the French 'ressentiment.' (There is the word *Groll*, which, however, does not characterize a frame of mind or an attitude, but tends to arise with regard to a specific event or person.)," p. 164, note 11.

<sup>6</sup> Dühring (1865). See Small (1997) for discussion.

<sup>7</sup> May (1999), p. 42.

us to see better what characterizes some of the forms of *ressentiment* that Nietzsche has in his sights: for example, the *ressentiment* of those unable to exact actual revenge who might “recover their losses” with “imaginary revenge” (GM, I:10) or how *ressentiment* might involve distorting the objects of one’s hatred (e.g., by thinking falsely that they are capable of acting otherwise) (GM, I:13). But I think this account ends up being too focused on certain specific manifestations of *ressentiment* to let us bring the more general phenomenon into view. We need to allow for the fact that *ressentiment*, even perhaps by Nietzsche’s lights, can terminate in actual revenge. It can involve a clear-eyed apprehension of the object of one’s animus. And it needn’t be freighted with existential angst with a universal scope; it can be a more focused form of personal hostility unencumbered by this.

So what can we then say about Nietzschean *ressentiment*, by way of a more general characterization? We might move in the other interpretive direction, and build very little into *ressentiment*. Scott Jenkins, in this vein, interprets Nietzsche as saying that *ressentiment* just is a feeling of vengefulness.<sup>8</sup> It has, in Jenkins’s view, been overlaid with various other psychological elements by overreaching interpretations. But these elements, according to Jenkins, are merely features of some people who have *ressentiment*, not what the state consists in. He marshals some good evidence that interpreters have read too much into Nietzschean *ressentiment*. But there are two main challenges with the quite minimalist alternative reading that he proposes instead.

The first is that Nietzsche is extremely negative about *ressentiment*, but far less negative about vengefulness in some of its manifestations. Nietzsche, for instance, in the *Genealogy* (GM I:14) cites the Homeric dictum that revenge is “sweeter than honey,” in such

---

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins (2016).

a way as to suggest he has sympathy with the sentiment.<sup>9</sup> That pro-revenge attitude is indeed a central part of the archaic Greek worldview. When someone wrongs you or those you care about, you take violent action and savour the outcome of such action.<sup>10</sup> Achilles kills Hector in revenge for death of Patroclus. Turning the other cheek would be a mark of unheroic weakness. (Of course, he is unduly cruel in then abusing the corpse, but the revenge itself was welcome, according to the outlook of the time.) Not all cases of feeling vengeful are thus plausibly cases of *ressentiment*. It is particularly clear in cases like this where the revenge is about settling a score for something done to a third party. From Homer down to spaghetti westerns to Tarantino, this ethic of revenge is a central cultural strand. If *any* major figure in the modern philosophical tradition should be sensitive to the allure of this, it is surely the “immoralist” Nietzsche. While he doesn’t straightforwardly identify his own sympathies solely with the warrior ethic he portrays in the *Genealogy*, he wants to remind us that aspects of it still do reverberate, because they were on to something.

A second main consideration is that in various passages Nietzsche mentions *ressentiment* along with but separately from various related terms, including a feeling of vengefulness, suggesting that they are not just to be identified.<sup>11</sup> Take, for instance, his remark: “Nothing burns one up faster than the affects of *ressentiment*. Anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge, thirst for revenge, poison-mixing in any sense - no reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted...” (EH, “Wise,” 6). Here the “thirst for revenge” is described as *one* of the affects of *ressentiment*, suggesting *ressentiment* is

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf., Staten (1988) on the complexities surrounding the context of this quotation in Homer.

<sup>10</sup> Forster (2011) rightly notes that this is a central element of the archaic Greek ethics that Nietzsche sets against Judeo-Christian morality.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Ken Gemes on this point.

not just to be identified with it.<sup>12</sup> Even if every case of *ressentiment* involves a desire for revenge, it doesn't follow that every case of a desire for revenge is, in Nietzsche's eyes, a case of *ressentiment*. The latter state is apparently more specific in its affective profile, reflecting what this feeling of revenge has done to one.<sup>13</sup>

If *ressentiment* is nothing more than a feeling of vengefulness, then the notion becomes deprived of much independent theoretical interest in moral and philosophical psychology. It is something for which we already had and have a good term. Yet most of us who read Nietzsche think he is on to something more specific and psychologically complex. Vengefulness is part of that, but not it in its entirety and specificity. I take it that there is indeed such a richer notion, and set out to explicate it here. But I don't have the space in this paper to treat all the relevant Nietzschean texts, and thus will not stake much on the exegetical issue *per se*.

Jenkins, I believe, is right that there is a danger of reading too much of the conditions of certain instances of *ressentiment* back in to the more general notion. Whereas May's reading builds in too much, Jenkins's reading builds in too little. One potential middle ground is to look more thoroughly at the psychodynamics underlying *ressentiment*. This psychodynamical direction is the route Bernard Reginster takes in his recent interpretation of Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> According to Reginster's reconstruction of Nietzsche's view, *ressentiment* involves a situation whereby one is in a situation of perceived powerlessness, but one refuses

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf., also A, 45 and GM, III:15.

<sup>13</sup> In this passage, Nietzsche highlights what he takes to be its characteristic effects on health: "such affects involve a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful excretions—for example, of the gall bladder into the stomach." (EH, "Wise," 6).

<sup>14</sup> Reginster (Forthcoming). This is different (though in some ways complementary) take to Reginster's earlier (1997) approach.

to accept this powerlessness, and takes various countermeasures to seek to restore the feeling of power. Reginster understands this power in broadly formal terms: as a desire for what he calls “effective agency,” that is, having the capacity to enforce your will on the world.

This is a promising account of what underlies a number of cases of *ressentiment*, a theory that has the potential to shed light not just on Nietzsche’s own examples, but possibly on some of the central ones I began the paper with. One very helpful feature of Reginster’s account is its focus, at the depth psychological level, on feelings of powerlessness. A sense of one’s own inadequacy on this front (which one may half admit, or not admit at all) is indeed often at the heart of *ressentiment*, even when ire is directed outward. The intentional object of *ressentiment* and its cause (or some of its causes) can come apart. Elliott Rodger hated the, in his terms, “stuck up” sorority women who wouldn’t sleep with him.<sup>15</sup> But a deeper cause of his anger may have been his own feelings of emasculated powerlessness, even if this is not primarily how he represented things to himself.

While I think Reginster is correct to emphasize threats to one’s effective agency, I’m concerned that his account overplays this insight. The first problem with Reginster’s account is that not all instances of the dynamic he describes are plausibly thought of as instances of *ressentiment*. Consider the following cases, involving power in a more localized domain: an athlete wants to beat a vastly more talented competitor and is frustrated that he can’t. Yet he refuses to give in, and undertakes a training regimen which he knows will give him only a small probability of actually besting this competitor. On Reginster’s view, this should be a case of *ressentiment*. But such a person might genuinely admire and respect his

---

<sup>15</sup> See Srinivasan (2018b) and Manne (2017) for discussion of this case.

rival and soldier on cheerfully.<sup>16</sup> Or consider someone in fact very talented whose prowess is challenged (maybe simply by an upstart competitor with beginner's luck), provoking feelings of inadequacy, but who then shoots 20 straight baskets to reassure himself of his excellence and restore his feelings of confidence. He needn't have any sort of malice against the upstart. There are versions of these cases with added psychological features that could be cases of *ressentiment*. But Reginster's account wrongly entails that the very structure of this dynamic (challenge to effective agency, refusal to accept this, countermeasure) is one of *ressentiment*. The structure is simply too general to characterize *ressentiment* well.

The second, and more serious, problem with Reginster's account is about what generates *ressentiment*. On his story, powerlessness plays that role. But why should it be powerlessness alone? People care about more than just power, understood as merely formal effective agency. People also care about status, for instance, being recognized in the eyes of others, gaining certain kudos, living up to a certain self-conception, getting coveted goods, and so on. These, particularly the concerns around status and recognition, are also fertile territory for *ressentiment*; powerlessness is not the sole cause. Take the case of an extremely talented Olympic athlete who performs at her absolute best in diving, but is "robbed," as we might say, of the Gold by unsympathetic judges. She might then come to feel deep *ressentiment* against them, against her rival, or both. Let us suppose she remains highly confident in her abilities, and is reassured by the fact that many keen diving enthusiasts also share the sense that she was unfairly judged. What will generate her *ressentiment* is this slight, not doubts about her power in this domain. As Nietzsche perceptively recognized, slights

---

<sup>16</sup> I owe this case to Ken Gemes.

are often at the core of experiences of *ressentiment*.<sup>17</sup> People feel they haven't gotten their due. We could, I suppose, retell the story with an account about how this is all about a desire for power qua effective agency at bottom, or ultimately rooted in insecurities about potency. After all, the athlete wasn't powerful (i.e., effective) enough to prevent or to redress this slight. Might *that* be at the root of her *ressentiment*? It might well be a contributing and exacerbating factor, but it doubtful that this bears the brunt of the explanatory work. The reason for that is simple: The very shape of Reginster's account requires that we care about a lot of other things in addition to power-as-effective-agency (namely, the substantive goals we want to achieve as effective agents), and some of these things (esteem in the other eyes of others, worldly goods, achievement, and so on) are also things we may care about for their own sake. Why then should threats to power-as-effective agency be the primary or sole source of *ressentiment*? Damages to one's sense of self worth, being disrespected, not being adequately recognized, not getting what one feels entitled to, and so on, seem at least as important, if not more important. The account I present in what follows will make these kinds of failures more central to the story. *Ressentiment*, in the first instance, is a deeply intersubjective, positional phenomenon. We should begin with these easier cases, before turning to the unusual and puzzling cases (*ressentiment* against oneself, *ressentiment* against time) that concern Nietzsche too.

Reginster must be right that there is some intimate connection between power, as he understands it, and *ressentiment*. But his account is too focused on power to illuminate what *ressentiment* is and what generates it. We need to find some way of supplementing the picture

---

<sup>17</sup> This is evident from his discussion of Mirabeau, offered as a positive example of someone who shrugs off or forgets such slights and thereby avoids *ressentiment* (GM, I:11). Clark (2015) highlights this dimension of Nietzsche's account relating to one's being slighted, p. 66.

by drawing on other features of the agent's psychological economy and outlook. *Ressentiment* has a more specific psychological profile. I'm doubtful Nietzsche himself has really explained it. But he has given us an intuitive sense of some of the sort of people he has in mind, and some extremely penetrating observations about their psychology. These are *instances* of the broader phenomenon that is of interest in this paper, not its full extent.

By way of summary in this section, there are four key misconceptions about *ressentiment* that we get from overgeneralizing from the particular cases that Nietzsche offers us (especially in GM I) and assuming that the features of those cases apply to *ressentiment* in general.

First, it is sometimes thought, based on Nietzsche's main examples, that *ressentiment* arises just among the weak and powerless. But, on closer inspection, this is not his view (Cf., GM, I:11). It can also, he thinks, arise among those who are not powerless (in any thick or interesting sense), but who feel they have been slighted or injured. This can be a feature of the comparatively well-off, the "noble," the "strong." There thus needn't be conditions of structural deprivation or powerlessness.<sup>18</sup>

Second, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* involves vengefulness that has been repressed.<sup>19</sup> It of course can. Those who maintain this are often thinking of Nietzsche's telling examples of those who preach Christian love, but deep down really feel vengeful hatred, and who cannot be honest with themselves about their malicious feelings. But not all cases of *ressentiment* are like this. The agent beset with *ressentiment* needn't mask from

---

<sup>18</sup> This cuts against a widespread view, which links *ressentiment* in Nietzsche closely (maybe essentially) to powerlessness, e.g., see Scheler (1915), Richardson (1996), p.61, Wallace (2007), Janaway (2007), p. 81, Leiter (2014). It is of course true that powerlessness is a key feature of (much of) the *ressentiment* thematized in GM I, and to that extent these readings are right. But I agree with Jenkins (2016) at least in thinking that we should not assume this powerlessness to be a feature of *ressentiment* in general.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., Reginster (1997), p. 286. (Reginster's current view has moved away from this commitment).

himself the fact that he is in this condition through mechanisms of self-deception. The anger and vengeful urges can also be knowingly suppressed for prudential reasons, or indeed can remain at the forefront of consciousness. When either happens, it does not thereby necessarily cease to be *ressentiment*.<sup>20</sup>

Third, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* terminates in or is somehow bound up with value creation or revaluation.<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche gives us a world historical example where he claims that it does so. The priestly people, on the story he tells in the *Genealogy*, take revenge by overturning the nobles' values and instituting a new set of "slavish" values with mass appeal (GM, I:10). But in many other, more ordinary cases, *ressentiment* doesn't involve this. It operates, and festers, against the backdrop of a stable set of values.

Fourth, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* needs to be a standing feature of character. Nietzsche will talk, for instance, of venomous people of *ressentiment*, those for whom this deep-seated disposition colors their way of looking at and being in the world. I think he's right that there are such people. But *ressentiment* on his view can also be an episodic state (GM I:11) in addition to a structuring orientation to the world. I think he's right to think that also. It can be a condition that one is in, but that one gets over, as one might get over a fit of rage or jealousy. We, in my view, need to understand both sorts of cases, and not assume that *ressentiment* is just the deep-seated thing, or that the deep-seated thing is the only philosophically-interesting phenomenon. As a methodological matter, I

---

<sup>20</sup> There is a more subtle question about whether the agent feeling *ressentiment* can represent to herself that this is the state she is feeling. Many are self-deceived, but this not impossible among the psychologically self-aware. Indeed, one of Nietzsche's many goals in the *Genealogy* is presumably to get his readers to be more self-aware (GM, "Preface," 1) about precisely these sorts of elements that continue to operate in our own psychology today. On this theme, see Gemes (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Cf., May (1999), p. 44.

think we get *ressentiment* more clearly in to view when we focus first on the episode of *ressentiment*. That is because it is a good first step in understanding people of *ressentiment* to think that they are people disposed to being in *this* sort of state. We of course might also delve deeper into their psychodynamics and say more to try to explain why that is (e.g., their deep feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, or what have you, and their ways of coping with these). But we won't get very far if we *start* with the supposed psychodynamics of people of *ressentiment* and then try to understand episodes of it, since many episodes may be had by people who don't share that speculative underlying psychology.

Nietzsche has put his finger on something psychologically distinctive that is not just in a quasi-mythic, quasi-historical past of priests, nobles, and the slave revolt, but is a key element continuing to operate in human psychology in a pervasive way. He himself further emphasizes this point, noting its ongoing operation today: “this plant [of *ressentiment*] now blooms most beautifully among anarchists and anti-Semites—in secret, incidentally, as it has always bloomed, like the violet, albeit with a different scent” (GM, II:11). This, of course, is stinging verbal irony; *ressentiment's* scent is not “beautiful,” but repulsive.

What I shall try to do in the next section is to develop an account of *ressentiment*, building on some of the lessons from this section, but in a way that is not meant to be simply or primarily Nietzsche exegesis. He has a rhetorical tendency to oversalt his prose with coarse modal claims (e.g., in the quotation above, that *ressentiment* has “always bloomed” “in secret”). Maybe. Other things Nietzsche says seem to be in some tension with that. But we don't, for the purposes of this paper, need to terminate discussion in parsing Nietzsche's specific remarks. In this way, my disagreement with the Nietzsche interpreters mentioned in this section is in places possibly less sharp than it might seem; their goal is to

report and reconstruct how this term function's in Nietzsche's *oeuvre*, and in doing so, to make sense of various of Nietzsche's apparent commitments. I think there are still some purely exegetical challenges with their respective readings. But insofar as we want an interpretation of Nietzsche, we might emphasize various interpretive virtues of an account over others: the best rational reconstruction of the term given the role it is supposed to play throughout the three essays of the *Genealogy* for instance, or what the historical individual Friedrich Nietzsche himself understood or likely meant by the term, or what he literally says on the page, or perhaps something else still. I don't offer a developed, alternative reading of Nietzsche by any of these metrics. I will take some guidance from Nietzsche, but my focus is on saying what I think *ressentiment* is and what use this notion has for us in moral psychology today.

### **III. A Theory of *Ressentiment***

It is clear enough that *ressentiment* is, in certain respects, akin to a “reactive attitude,” in the sense of that term we get from P.F. Strawson.<sup>22</sup> But we can't understand it simply by focusing on the conditions that precipitate it—whether a perceived injustice, a slight to one's status, a frustrated feeling of powerlessness, a condition of systematic deprivation or one of profound and unremediated suffering. Nor can we focus simply on what one wants to do in response to this—namely, to strike back in vengeance, or in some way to mount a demonstration or achieve a reassurance of one's power. A story about *ressentiment*, in my view, is going to need to be holistic, seeing what the reactive attitude does (or can do) to the agent who has it. We thus need to see how this condition fits in to the agent's broader

---

<sup>22</sup> Strawson (1962).

psychological economy in order to see whether it rises to the level of a case of *ressentiment*. In what follows, I will explore the import of two metaphors we get from Nietzsche, centering on how *ressentiment* has a tendency to “poison” one and to make one ugly.<sup>23</sup> Exploring these ideas, in conjunction with refining some other characteristics, will help us see what *ressentiment* is, how it operates, what distinguishes it from closely-related states, and, finally, why it is problematic.

A review of the secondary literature on Nietzsche has given us the direction in which to look. But the accounts we looked at were either too unspecific or too specific. On the “too unspecific” side: They were capturing as *ressentiment* cases that intuitively are not, or they were not telling us enough about its psychological specificity. On the “too specific” side: they were generalizing too much from the particularities of Nietzsche’s examples, or assuming that powerlessness is the key to *ressentiment*. Although Reginster goes in the right direction in thinking about the psychodynamics of *ressentiment*, he focuses, arguably following Nietzsche, on the operations of the will to power as his principal explanatory tool. This, in my view, is too monistic, and understates how the concern for recognition and status are equally, if not more, prominent in cases of *ressentiment*. I shall set out my account of *ressentiment*, and then proceed to expand on each of the main conditions and then to defend it from some potential objections.

*Ressentiment* is a state of the psyche involving:

---

<sup>23</sup> On poisoning, see GM, I:10. The poisoning aspect is also highlighted by Scheler (1915). On ugliness, it is less a matter of a direct assertion to this effect, but rather in the flavor of imagery (e.g., “cellar rodents” (GM I:14), “deformed” “worm-eaten” (GM III:14)) that Nietzsche uses to portray those beset with *ressentiment*. Such imagery is of course multi-faceted, and gets at various other features of the state too.

- i) suffering and anger in relation to
- ii) a perceived injury, slight, or undesirable state of affairs
- iii) that one feels to be have been perpetrated on one.
- iv) One resents ii)/iii) and often regards ii)/iii) as unjust or unfair
- v) and one moreover perceives ii)/iii) as insulting or demeaning.
- vi) On account of i)-v), one desires vengeance.

The overall effect, in cases of *ressentiment*, is that:

- vii) the features described above have a tendency to “poison” the agent and to make him/her “ugly.”

The lynchpin here is condition vii), and I will elaborate on it metaphors shortly. But let me turn to elaborating the conditions of *ressentiment* in the order set out above. *Ressentiment* is, first of all, characterized by a negative phenomenology. If there is an injury or a slight or an unfortunate condition that I don't know about, or don't care much about, it is not going to be the occasion for *ressentiment*. It has to, on some level, make me angry and make me suffer, etc. Hence i).

*Ressentiment* is provoked by something, and frequently (though not always) takes this as its target. This spark can be an isolated incident (e.g., Maria got the promotion, and John didn't), or a more standing condition (e.g., John is upset that no one respects or appreciates his philosophical contributions). Often it is a combination of the two, where a particular incident might tap into deeper and more pervasive feelings of inadequacy, indignation, or frustration. Sometimes, the cause of the *ressentiment* and its intentional object may come

apart. John might have *resentiment* about Maria's promotion, but the cause (or at least a major cause) of the *resentiment* is (let us suppose) his own feelings of inadequacy (which he may or may not fully admit to himself). Likewise, an agent may have *resentiment* in reaction to what he merely perceives to be a slight, but which in fact isn't. (Perhaps he mishears or misinterprets a compliment as an insult.) *Resentiment* is thus a reaction to a ii) perceived injury, slight, or undesirable state of affairs.

*Resentiment* is a three-way relation. There is the agent with the *resentiment*, the state or incident it is in response to, and the putative perpetrator on whom his ire fixates. This perpetrator iii) is the felt cause of the state or incident that the agent is reacting to. The agent feeling *resentiment* needn't think of the perpetrator in particularly agential terms.<sup>24</sup> He might have *resentiment* against someone that he doesn't take to be morally responsible, or even aware of what he or she is doing. The putative perpetrator can also be a corporate or non-human entity (a company, nation, even God). The point is that the problematic state or incident is not simply regarded as an unfortunate state of affairs; it is a constitutive part of *resentiment* that blame is sought somewhere. The person with *resentiment* feels, on some level, that the state or incident is traceable to this perpetrator. The connection to the alleged perpetrator, it must be stressed, is often tenuous, illogical, or entirely non-existent. (Someone might be upset about his declining standard of living and the loss of his job, and blame "immigrants" for that.) Sometimes, this blame may be out of step with one's conscious, reflectively-endorsed beliefs, but one feels it to be the case even so. One might thus have *resentiment* toward that conspicuously successful person even though he has not led in any appreciable or intelligible way to the unfortunate (or often—let's be realistic—

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf., Strawson (1962) on resentment.

very moderately less fortunate) state one finds oneself in; what will make this a case of *ressentiment* instead of just envy is in part the primitive unconscious logic of this sort of blame. To further illustrate the centrality of such blame, take the case of the accomplished runner, who loses his legs in an accident. Unless there is a target of his anger in the form of a felt perpetrator (whether an agent, a group, or a more abstract entity [e.g., that corporation] on whom blame is placed), it is not going to be a case of *ressentiment*. If one truly just accepts (both theoretically, and at a more affective or unconscious level) that it is a freak occurrence, one is not going to have *ressentiment*, though one may have a range of other negative emotions (e.g., despondency, depression). Hence, I submit, condition iii).

Often, *ressentiment* will bring to bear a normative framework in the agent's thinking as well. Although the idea of the perpetrator is basically just a causal one, the agent with *ressentiment* will also typically feel that something unjust or unfair has been done to him. I stress this point because ordinary moral resentment and *ressentiment* can overlap a great deal. It is sometimes wrongly supposed that they must be distinguished sharply; if thoughts of morality or justice enter the picture, then it becomes a case of moral resentment and is no longer *ressentiment*.<sup>25</sup> But this is wrong; they are not mutually exclusive. Cases of resentment can be (or can turn into) cases of *ressentiment* depending on how these feelings of moral indignation and the like operate within the agent's psychological economy. It's striking, in fact, how often the vocabulary of justice or fairness gets appealed to by agents of apparent

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf., May (1999), Reginster (Forthcoming), Ch. 4. It might be thought that *ressentiment*, on Nietzsche's account, preexists (and in fact precipitates) morality; therefore, morality and thoughts of justice can't figure into the psychology of *ressentiment*. Even simply as Nietzsche exegesis, this conclusion is unwarranted. First, there can be normative thoughts of justice (fairness and unfairness, desert, blame, etc.) that are not part of the Judeo-Christian framework that, according to Nietzsche, arises with the slave revolt. Second, even if specifically moral thoughts don't figure in all instances of *ressentiment*, such as those preceding the slave revolt, that has no bearing on whether they figure in some later instances of *ressentiment*.

*resentiment*. This happens even when the notion of justice or fairness being employed is highly warped, or reflective of a perverse and inappropriate sense of entitlement. Elliott Rodger's constant refrain centers around these notions; these women *ought* to be having sex with him, yet aren't. In his twisted way, he perceives this to be unfair and unjust.<sup>26</sup> While notions of justice often play a central role in the agent's thinking, *resentiment* needn't necessarily involve such thoughts. Someone might slight you by saying that your philosophy talk or the meal you cooked was not very good. Suppose this is a case where the person is not knowingly giving offense, maybe saying this in a way that is not gratuitously mean, in a situation where you accidentally overheard. You might agree with their assessment, and their assessment might be true, but you might still feel the occasion for *resentiment*.<sup>27</sup> Hence iv).

*Resentiment* is not a matter of just any sort of injury, however. It, I suspect, involves injuries, slights, or standing conditions that represent an affront. The basic idea is that the injury, slight, or standing state of affairs insults or demeans your worth, either as a person full stop, or in some more specific role, particularly one that you care very much about (e.g., being an accomplished philosopher or sportsperson). Hence v). Suppose someone says something cutting about my philosophical acumen. That may be a source of worry. But I will not feel similarly about my basketball talents, such as they are, being denigrated, because I have no such talents, and don't care about having them. For others, matters may be reversed with philosophy and basketball. Places where social hierarchies are in play are especially ripe for *resentiment*. Yet although we often (tempted by Nietzsche's main examples) think of

---

<sup>26</sup> See Srinivasan (2018b) and Manne (2017) for discussion of this case.

<sup>27</sup> I owe this sort of example to Elgat (2017).

*ressentiment* as exclusively tied to a backdrop of such power dynamics and disparities, it needn't be. It also characterizes situations where people are at or near the very top of the pecking order, and feel that this is not being adequately respected. Take the case of the sulking Achilles, which seems to me to be a central instance of *ressentiment*. He feels that the prize of Briseis should have gone to him, yet he has been unfairly deprived by Agamemnon. He's not doubtful that he deserves her. He believes he does, and that is partly what precipitates his spectacular episode of *ressentiment* that we get at the beginning of the *Illiad*. Or consider the white supremacists, or the proverbial well-off Trump voter. They might feel *ressentiment* toward people they think are encroaching on their territory, getting "uppity," lazy moochers getting things they don't deserve. (Whether it is an instance of *ressentiment* will depend on the specifics of the case, which we are not always in a good position to judge; all the real-world examples I give are governed by that proviso.) It is important to remember that although *ressentiment* is most often felt toward those one perceives to be higher in the pecking order, it can also be felt toward those one perceives to be lower, or toward one's perceived equals. Threats to status, elevation of others to what one regards as an inappropriate status, and deprivation of what one thinks one is due on account of one's status can figure centrally in *ressentiment*.

Salient as well will be a desire for revenge. This is one way in which moral resentment begins to come apart from *ressentiment*. In the more admirable cases of moral resentment at least, one might seek an apology, or protest the unfair situation or behavior and seek to change it through exhortation, corrective action, and the like. But in *ressentiment*, one wants the putative perpetrator to suffer. Often, one wants to cause this suffering oneself, but one can also be satisfied with the putative perpetrator simply getting a comeuppance.

*Ressentiment* will often involve vivid fantasies about such revenge (Cf., GM, I:15). Sometimes these are consciously entertained on the part of the agent, as in the case of the embittered narrator in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Sometimes they are unacknowledged by the agent, who claims to love his neighbor as himself, but still gets the thrill of *schadenfreude*, under the guise of the triumph of "justice." If we focus a great deal on the examples Nietzsche gives in GM I, we might think *ressentiment*-filled agents are those who are constitutionally powerless and incapable of taking real revenge, so make due with compensatory substitutes only. This certainly is characteristic of some agents with *ressentiment*. But others who are capable of revenge refrain from it for seemingly prudential reasons (Achilles not killing Agamemnon, for instance). And some actually do take revenge, whether in the form of petty passive aggression or in savage violence or in something in between. This may or may not dissipate their underlying *ressentiment*. In any event, this *desire* for revenge figures prominently. Hence vi).

Yet wanting revenge is not sufficient for *ressentiment*. There are cases of seeking revenge where none of the freight of *ressentiment* may be involved (perhaps Achilles wanting and taking revenge against Hector, discussed above). What is crucial to making it *ressentiment* is what it does (or threatens to do) to you. The best way of understanding that problematic dimension, I believe, is through two images we find in Nietzsche: *Ressentiment* has a tendency to poison you, and it makes you ugly. The image of poisoning suggests psychic harm to the agent suffering from it, and a threat to those nearby. The image of ugliness suggests the state's inherently rebarbative quality. Both metaphors underscore the fact that *ressentiment* is a vice of character, and give us further clarity about why it is so.

How does this poisoning metaphor capture how *ressentiment* is harmful to the agent?

This mainly suggests the way it can tend to impair functioning through its potential for distorting effects on the rest of the psyche.<sup>28</sup> Its obsessive quality might, in some cases, steal energy from other tasks. Its retrospective focus might, in some cases, lead one to dwell on past slights rather than planning for the future. The self-deception it sometimes involves might undermine one's integrity as an agent.<sup>29</sup> Its emphasis on violence might lead the agent to outright self-destruction. The other dimension of the poisoning metaphor is its *interpersonal* toxicity. People beset with *ressentiment* can make whole environments around them “toxic” too, whether by fostering *ressentiment* in others, or simply by creating an insalubrious and unpleasant atmosphere. When faced with people of *ressentiment*, we often want to keep a *cordon sanitaire*.

Note, in the case of poisoning, the emphasis on “tendency.” This points to a dispositional feature of it, or, perhaps more precisely, of conditions i)-vi) taken together).<sup>30</sup> In cases of *ressentiment*, there is a tendency toward the poisoning of the psyche. The dispositional hedge is important because there are various ways in which such conditions and feelings can potentially be dealt with—processed, as it were—so that this doesn't happen, or so that its potentially ill effects are diminished. An agent might be energized by his *ressentiment*, “own” it, draw sustenance from it, and on. Those cases are more rare, but they are another reason its poisoning dimension needs to be thought of in dispositional terms. In most cases of *ressentiment*, however, particularly those of a longer duration, the disposition is likely to be manifested and the agent is in fact poisoned by it. This will be

---

<sup>28</sup> This sort of poisoning is not unique to *ressentiment*. We can be poisoned by jealousy, envy, etc.

<sup>29</sup> This point is developed well in Reginster (1997).

<sup>30</sup> *Ressentiment* (the full package) also itself poisons, because of its tendency to exacerbate through self-perpetuation.

particularly correlated with and exacerbated by the agent's powerlessness.

Perhaps the more crucial metaphor, however, is that of making one *ugly*. It is a metaphor at least in the sense that the *way* in which one is ugly needn't be a matter of sheer visual appearance. It can be. But it primarily meant to be getting at an *ugliness of soul*, an aesthetic-ethical way of couching a certain (judgment about) a defect of character. The metaphor is capturing, in part, how the condition of *ressentiment* is taken to be an inherently bad state for the human psyche to be in. But that's not all. The image at the same time is also getting at something more specific, namely that the state in question is found to be *repulsive*.<sup>31</sup> Not all inherently bad states have that quality. The ugly condition of those with *ressentiment* casts a pall on their interactions with others.<sup>32</sup>

To judge that someone is beset with *ressentiment* thus involves thinking that he is manifesting an ugliness of soul (at least in this episode, if not in general). But on what *basis* does one make this judgment? What psychological characteristics license it? There is not, I believe, an informative answer to this question, if what one is in search of are further features that give necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the application of this metaphor in the service of normative assessment. The cases of ugliness of soul *just are* the cases where this metaphor is (judged) apt to describe the agent in question, and it will depend on the specific form that conditions i)-vi) take in his/her case. That makes the notion somewhat unsatisfying perhaps, but this fuzziness is precisely to be expected, given my account: It reflects the fact that the charge of *ressentiment* is necessarily bound up with a (potentially contentious) normative judgment that a specific vice is being manifested in the state in

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf., Poellner (2011)

<sup>32</sup> The repulsive quality of *ressentiment* can also be fascinating, one reason we are drawn to *ressentiment*-laced Twitter feeds, even as we find them loathsome and rebarbative.

question.<sup>33</sup> Akin to “cowardice” or “boorishness,” it identifies a psychological condition (judged) worthy of disapprobation.

To say that *ressentiment* is an objectionable psychic condition, or a vice or defect, is not to deny that it can have good effects. It might be conducive to creativity. It might make one work all the harder to prove oneself. Give one a certain energy. And so on. It’s in general true of defects or vices that they can have this structure of potential benefit (to oneself, and to the broader world) as well as harm. A enduring lesson from Nietzsche is that it is rare for things to be wholly good or wholly bad. Thanks to *ressentiment*, humanity, he claims, has become deeper and more interesting (GM, I:6). *Ressentiment*’s complex effects are bound up in a way that is very difficult to disentangle. But that said, there is always going to be something *pro tanto* bad about the state of *ressentiment* and something ethically defective about an agent in this state.

It is a defect of character even where the target of *ressentiment* is, in some sense, an appropriate target of the reactive feelings. Even in cases where the anger is justified, or morally justified, my view explains why there is something problematic about slipping into *ressentiment* itself. Consider certain kinds of social justice warriors. They might be wholly right. The target of their criticism is blameworthy, deserving of censure and so on. But in some cases, they have slipped from righteous anger into a toxic, ugly condition. We should be careful not to conflate *ressentiment* and anger, however. In some circumstances, anger is the entirely appropriate emotion to have. Some philosophical positions rooted in Stoicism

---

<sup>33</sup> Does this mean there is no ‘fact of the matter’ about whether it is a case of *ressentiment*? Not necessarily. It will depend on one’s background views about whether the agent’s normative judgment is sensitive to objective normative features of situation, or is instead imposing her outlook on it. I’m neutral on this issue, and thus, on whether there is really is ‘ugliness of soul,’ or simply judgments to that effect, without any objective backing.

try to dissuade us from anger entirely. They claim it is a destructive emotion that we should avoid. It clouds our epistemic rationality, makes us less sensitive to considerations of justice, exacerbates psychic tension within ourselves.<sup>34</sup> Amia Srinivasan in my view rightly points out that these Stoic and neo-Stoic treatments of anger conflate the issue of whether anger is apt and whether its effects are good.<sup>35</sup> It can be assessed along both dimensions. My own view on the topic is what we might describe as neo-Aristotelian. Anger is an appropriate emotion in certain circumstances. There is something meritorious about the agent who feels the appropriate amount of anger in the appropriate degree in the appropriate circumstances. There is, *prima facie* at least, something wanting in the agent (the doormat, for instance, or the utterly affectless person) who fails to feel anger when such anger is called for. One who is opposed to *ressentiment* needn't be opposed to anger in all its forms. For while *ressentiment* involves anger, not all anger involves *ressentiment*. One important distinction between anger and *ressentiment* is that anger needn't be bound up with a desire for revenge. The angry agent, for instance, might just want a sincere recognition of the harm caused and an apology from the wrongdoer, or steps taken to remedy the underlying issue in the future. Yet like resentment, anger can slide into the territory of *ressentiment*. We all know of angry people who just can't "let go," who felt appropriate anger initially, but continue to nurse the grievance well beyond that point. These are sometimes cases of *ressentiment*. The most pernicious forms of *ressentiment* are those that are no longer episodic responses to a

---

<sup>34</sup> The *locus classicus* is Seneca, *De Ira* [On Anger]. See Nussbaum (2001) and (2014) for a contemporary treatment in a neo-Stoic spirit. Nussbaum is not against strong emotions in general, but thinks there is something especially problematic about anger in particular.

<sup>35</sup> Srinivasan (2018a).

particular incident but become one's default orientation toward the world.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, angry agents can often be challenging to be around as well, and general discomfort on the part of others needn't be a consideration against their justified anger. It might be good, and appropriate, that they make others upset by, for instance, drawing an attention to an injustice that is difficult to face. The mere fact that the emotion makes one difficult to be around doesn't settle whether it is *ressentiment* or a manifestation of anger that is not a form of *ressentiment*. Whether it is *ressentiment* depends on the psychology of the agent (and a normative judgment about it), and observers can be highly fallible (as well as biased) judges of what state the agent is in. A rush to label a state as *ressentiment* can be a way of unduly dismissing its legitimacy and avoiding a confrontation with a view, a point, or a person that one doesn't want to deal with.

So far, I've presented an account of what I take *ressentiment* to be. But what's to say that the state I've identified is appropriately described as "*ressentiment*"? The objection might run as follows: I've strayed too far from Nietzsche. The term, this thought continues, only really makes sense in the context of Nietzsche's work and the examples he gives us. That determines its meaning. In response, I would say that Nietzsche has no proprietary claim on this notion. It was in discourse before him, and it now has resonances of its own (which Nietzsche played a key, though not exclusive, role in shaping.) Moreover, we should not suppose that a great deal in my account turns on the word *per se*. I have tried to argue that this is an important category, or sub-category, that we should think more about. I want to illuminate a particular psychological condition, with which I take it most of us are familiar. "*Ressentiment*" is, in my opinion, the best candidate term we have for this state, but the state

---

<sup>36</sup> See Wallace (2007), Leiter (2014), and Huddleston (2017) for further elaboration of this distinction between episodic *ressentiment* and being a 'person of *ressentiment*.'

has been around a great deal longer this term.<sup>37</sup> One way of trying to reinforce the appropriateness of the term “*ressentiment*” is to see how what I’m describing is distinct from closely-related states such as anger, resentment, envy, and schadenfreude. Now, it bears noting that a given agent at a given time needn’t be, exclusively, in one of these states. A given person is often feeling a mixture of these emotions. But I’ve tried to say what I think is distinctive about the psychological profile of *ressentiment* and the role of this notion in moral psychological discourse.

Resentment and *ressentiment* are related as genus to species. Although all resentment involves (i)-(iii), and often can involve (iv), it needn’t involve being insulted or demeaned (v), the desire for revenge (vi), the poisoning of the psyche or the agent being made ugly (vii). Instead of wanting revenge, and being grotesquely contorted by your feelings, you can be indignant, you can want an apology, you can want to work with the person to improve his behavior, you can respond with cool dignity to slights, you can turn the other cheek, or you can simply be depressed about the whole situation. In some of the morally admirable cases of resentment, one looks on the other second-personally, as a kind of moral equal, an agent to whom such grievances might be addressed. This is not the dynamic of *ressentiment*.<sup>38</sup> But cases of resentment can degenerate into *ressentiment*, and when conditions vi) and particularly vii) are met, this is the sign that such degeneration has happened.

The issues of self-worth, entitlement, and status that I suggest are in play when it comes to *ressentiment* can suggest important similarities to envy. Many cases of *ressentiment* of

---

<sup>37</sup> If one insisted on using some other word— say “rancor” or “embitterment” or “aggrievement”— little of substance in my account would be lost. Even so, to my ear, those words don’t have quite the same flavor. There is inherent desire for vengeance in *ressentiment* (whether repressed or at the surface) that these words perhaps needn’t carry.

<sup>38</sup> Darwall (2013).

course involve envy as well. Envy, in general, involves wanting something that someone else has—the nice car or the good looks or the professional success, say.<sup>39</sup> This might involve suffering from the lack of it. But one needn't resent the situation, or regard it as unjust, or demonize the possessor of the coveted good. Such envy needn't involve a desire for revenge either.<sup>40</sup> Thus, fairly obviously, not all cases of envy are cases of *ressentiment*. But not all cases of *ressentiment* are cases of envy either. Consider the (reasonably well-off) “white nationalist.” He needn't be envious. But he nonetheless thinks that there is a threat to his power and status. Others are getting something they, in his view, don't deserve. That provokes *ressentiment*, but needn't involve envy. *Ressentiment* can look a lot like schadenfreude too. But in cases of schadenfreude, one needn't perceive an injury or a slight or a standing unfortunate condition. One can be perfectly well-off and feel the frisson of schadenfreude. Not every case of schadenfreude is a case of *ressentiment*. Nor is every case of *ressentiment* a case of schadenfreude. *Ressentiment* involves a *desire* for revenge; in cases of schadenfreude, the focus is on savoring the already-actual misfortune of the other, sometimes when it is perceived as a deserved comeuppance.<sup>41</sup> There are further important distinctions to be drawn among these psychological notions, despite there being considerable overlap. My aim here has been to try to give us some help in marking off the state of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, I've tried to suggest, is a concept that helps us illuminate an important and objectionable psychological condition. But that is not what is most distinctive and useful about it. After all, we could do much (maybe all) of the psychologically descriptive work with our existing

---

<sup>39</sup> See Protasi (2017) for a helpful account of envy.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., Wallace (2007) distinguishing *ressentiment* from envy.

<sup>41</sup> Watt Smith (2018) offers a good characterization of schadenfreude and a range of excellent examples.

notions, such as anger and resentment. Its role, I've suggested, is not just to describe a psychology, but to condemn it. Whereas the previous terms are (for most, anyway) neutral, *ressentiment* functions as a vice term.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The seeds of the view I put forward here are present in Nietzsche, but what I offer is not clearly Nietzsche's view. That said, it is, I believe, not incompatible with the main thread of Nietzsche's position either. But this paper is not a work of exegesis. If we focus too much on Nietzsche, this may lead us to an artificial restriction of the term to confine ourselves to thinking just about Nietzsche's own sorts of examples, rather than some of the most powerful contemporary examples surrounding us. This, I think, would be a shame, if we want to understand the broader phenomenon.

Some of the examples cited as cases of *ressentiment* may fall into disputed territory, particularly from those who take Nietzsche as their main point of guidance. Those wedded to a narrower view of *ressentiment* may thus bristle about this extension. I have, in reply, tried to suggest in this paper that the cases in question form an interesting class, and that *ressentiment* is the best term we have for describing such cases. Perhaps inevitably, a philosophical account is going to impose more regimentation on a term like this than we have in our ordinary usage of it. I am, for my part, not simply trying to report on our present use of the term (and of course, many of us don't now use it!), though I think many examples of our usage support the line I want to take. Sometimes, for instance, the terms

“resentment” or “anger” are used in cases where “*ressentiment*” might also apply.<sup>42</sup> On my view, this is accurate, but not as specific as we might want to be. We might have good reason for being more specific in some cases, but also for refraining from being more specific in others—for example, where we are talking in a broad way about large groups, or aren’t in a position to opine on the psychology of the individual agents themselves. That is one reason I describe my real world cases cautiously, as potential instances of *ressentiment*. Likewise, we may not be trying to describe a psychological condition, but also to indict it as a vice. This is further reason we may want to employ *ressentiment*.

As so often in philosophy, we find ourselves with the term “*ressentiment*” operating in a productive interplay between how we do use a term and how we might use it. A similar sort of interplay marks the literatures surrounding guilt, shame, jealousy, envy. Their boundaries are not as clear-cut as we might like. With all of these states just mentioned, however, we have far more philosophical resources for thinking about them and their operations. I think we need greater such resources when it comes to *ressentiment*. This will help us understand ourselves and each other better as agents—not simply as rational agents, but as agents who are sometimes gripped by feelings that are deeply nasty. As Nietzsche says at the beginning of the *Genealogy*, we “knowers” are “unknown” to ourselves. (GM, “Preface,” 1). It is difficult to admit that we (collectively) can be like this. But admitting this

---

<sup>42</sup> For example, Faludi (1991), discussing gender issues, and Anderson (2016), discussing race issues, sometimes use the term “resentment.” This seems to me the right move in that they are discussing wide social trends. But *ressentiment* may be characteristic of many of the (typically white male) agents involved.

is a step forward to self-knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> My thanks to Ken Gemes, Jack Spencer, Béatrice Han-Pile, Sebastian Gardner, and Tom Dougherty for correspondence on this piece, to the participants in the Birkbeck Nietzsche Seminar and the Birkbeck Philosophy Works in Progress Seminar, and to an audience at the University of California, Riverside, from whom I received very useful feedback.

## **References**

- Abbey, Ruth (1999), "The Roots of Ressentiment" *New Nietzsche Studies* 3 (3-4), p. 47-61.
- Anderson, Carol (2016), *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing).
- Anderson, R. Lanier (2011), "On the Nobility of Nietzsche's Priests," in May (ed.) (2011).
- Bittner, Rüdiger (1993), "Ressentiment," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht, (Berkeley, University of California Press), 127-138.
- Clark, Maudemarie (2015), "Nietzsche's Contribution to Ethics," in her *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Darwall, Stephen (2013), "Ressentiment and Second-Personal Resentment" in his *Honor, History, and Relationship: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Dühring, Eugen (1865), *Der Wert des Lebens* (Leipzig, Fues's Verlag).
- Elgat, Guy, (2017), *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment: Revenge and Justice in On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford and New York: Routledge).
- Faludi, Susan (1991), *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown Publishing).
- Forster, Michael (2011), "Genealogy and Morality," *American Dialectic*, 1:3, p.346-369.
- Gemes, Ken (2006), "We Remain of Necessity Strangers to Ourselves': The Key Message of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*" in *On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora (New York: Rowman and Littlefield).
- Gemes, Ken (2019), "A Better Self: Freud and Nietzsche on the Nature and Value of Sublimation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychoanalysis*, ed. \_\_\_\_\_, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Huddleston, Andrew (2017), "Nietzsche on the Health of the Soul," *Inquiry* 60:2, p. 135-164.
- Jenkins, Scott (2016), "Ressentiment, Imaginary Revenge, and the Slave Revolt," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95:1, p. 192-213.
- Katsafanas, Paul (2016), *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Leiter, Brian (2014), *Nietzsche on Morality*, 2nd Ed., (Oxford and New York: Routledge).
- Manne, Kate (2017), *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- May, Simon (1999), *Nietzsche's Ethics and His War on 'Morality'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- May, Simon (ed.) (2011), *Nietzsche's On The Genealogy of Morals: A Critical Guide*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Janaway, Christopher (2007), *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kaufmann, Walter (1950), *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Mishra, Pankaj (2016), "Welcome to the Age of Anger," *The Guardian*, 8 Dec 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexite-trump>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1882/1974), *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books) [cited by section number with abbreviation 'GS'].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1887/ 1998), *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swenson (Indianapolis: Hackett) [cited by essay and section number with abbreviation 'GM'].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1888/1954) *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books) [cited by section number with abbreviation 'A'].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Ecce Homo* (1888/1967), trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books) [cited by chapter name and number with abbreviation 'EH'].
- Nussbaum, Martha (2001), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Nussbaum, Martha (2016), *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Pettigrove, Glen (2012), "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122 (2), p. 341-370.
- Poellner, Peter (2011), "Ressentiment and Morality," in May (ed.) (2011).
- Protasi, Sara (2017), "'I'm Not Envious, I'm Just Jealous!': On the Difference Between Envy and Jealousy," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 3:3, p.316-333.
- Reginster, Bernard (1997), "Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (2), p. 281-305.
- Reginster, Bernard (Forthcoming), *The Will to Nothingness: Understanding On the Genealogy of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Richardson, John (1996), *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Risse, Matthias (2003), "Origins of Ressentiment and the Sources of Normativity," *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (1), p. 142-170.

Scheler, Max (1915/ 2007) *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press).

Small, Robin (1997), "Ressentiment, Revenge, and Punishment: Origins of the Nietzschean Critique," *Utilitas* 9:1, 39-58.

Strawson, P.F. (1962), "Freedom and Resentment," in Gary Watson (ed.), *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48, p. 1-25.

Srinivasan, Amia (2018a) "The Aptness of Anger," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26:2, p. 123-44.

Srinivasan, Amia (2018b) "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?," *London Review of Books* 40:6.

Staten, Henry (1988), *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

Wallace, R.Jay (2007), "Ressentiment, Value, and Self-Vindication: Making Sense of the Slave Revolt," *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Watt Smith, Tiffany (2018), *Schadenfreude: The Joy of Another's Misfortune* (London: Profile Books).

Williams, Bernard (1993), "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," *European Journal of Philosophy* 1 (1), p. 4-14.