

Mnemotechnics and the Acquisition of Memory

Daniel Conway

Department of Philosophy
Texas A&M University
USA

conway@tamu.edu

Précis

Nietzsche's influential account of the history of morality, as elaborated in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [*On the Genealogy of Morality*] (1886), trades on a number of inventive anthropological hypotheses. Determined to account in strictly naturalistic terms for the development of contemporary morality, Nietzsche offers to treat human interiority as a complex articulation of animal psychology. Refusing any and all recourse to super-natural or metaphysical principles of explanation, Nietzsche intends to trace an unbroken line of development that connects 19th-century Europeans to the earliest hominids (as he figures them). Like all animals, he proposes, human beings are equipped with a full complement of instincts, which, as with all other animals, formerly served as reliable, pre-reflective guides for species-preserving patterns of behavior. Unlike all other animals, however, human beings have forfeited their ready access to their instinctual heritage, relying instead on the more recently emergent organ of *consciousness*. This unprecedented development became necessary, Nietzsche speculates, as the human animal found itself at a potentially fatal comparative disadvantage in the struggle for scarce resources and security.

In order to rely with confidence on the emergent organ of consciousness, the human animal was obliged to acquire a significantly expanded memorial capacity. According to Nietzsche, that is, memory was neither gifted to human beings by their God nor incident to their natural dowry of animal traits and instincts. Rather, the memorial capacity on which morality uniquely depends was acquired over time as the human animal came to grips with the demands and obligations of civil society. This acquisition was possible, or so Nietzsche hypothesizes, only on the strength of a protracted and artful regimen of what he calls *mnemotechnics*, i.e., the use and manipulation of *pain* to invest hominid (and, later, human) beings with an expanded active memory. Over the span of millennia, he insists, the human animal gradually acquired a memory for those enumerated precepts (or commandments) that are meant to ensure a peaceful co-existence within the sheltering walls of civil society.

In this presentation, I have three main objectives. First, I will provide a sympathetic reconstruction of Nietzsche's ingenious account of the acquisition of memory. I will be especially concerned to reckon what he regards as the opportunity costs incurred by the human animal as it became fully and functionally memorial. Second, I will survey several of the social practices and customs that Nietzsche believed were emblematic of the use of mnemotechnics to invest pre-memorial creatures with memories. Third, I will explain how Nietzsche's account of the acquisition of memory has influenced the development of depth psychology (e.g., Freud and Jung), critical theory (e.g., Marcuse and Adorno), modernist literature (e.g., Mann and Kafka), and post-modern philosophy (e.g., Deleuze & Guattari).