Sophisticated Geographies

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Abstract

This paper offers a reflection on the relevance of Nietzsche to recent geographical scholarship. It interrogates what we might mean by theoretically sophisticated geographies. Drawing on a specific context – the postcolonial apology in contemporary Australia – the paper turns to the relevance of Nietzsche's thinking about morality in charting everyday moral geographies and imagining more ethical futures.

> "how then did that other 'gloomy thing', the consciousness of guilt, the entire 'bad conscience' come into the world?" Friedrich Nietzsche 1887 *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay "Guilt, bad conscience and related matters".

In 1997 David Smith complained that the nexus between moral philosophy and geography was a "one-way street". Despite a resurgence of interest in ethics in geography, there is, he noted, "little evidence that moral philosophers have any interest in or knowledge of the subject-matter or literature of geography" (1997, 584). I do not know if that circumstance has changed; philosophers may still not be reading geographers but, as this paper indicates, the infrastructure of moral philosophy has been shaped by adjudications about geography and geographically specific knowledge. My engagement with Nietzsche occurred under very specific circumstances, the most important of which was delivered by the phenomenon I

and my collaborator, Haydie Gooder, were trying to understand: the controversy over an Australian 'settler' apology being given to Aborigines who, since the late eighteenth century, had been subjected to processes of colonisation. In particular, the apology was called for by Aborigines because they sought recognition of and reparation for the sense of loss caused by the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, a group that came to be dubbed "the Stolen Generation" (Gooder and Jacobs, 2000). Although now this apology has been formally given, during the 1990s the matter of whether an apology should be given or not was the basis of considerable debate.[2] Many non-Aboriginal Australians, including the then Prime Minister John Howard, resisted (even resented) the call for an apology and the emergence of a so-called "black armband history" of the nation upon which it was predicated. But other Australians faced the revelations about the past of the nation and welcomed the opportunity to say sorry. The national strategy for dealing with this heady mix of injury, bad conscience, resentment, memory work and reparation, was reconciliation. As I will explicate below, the nature of that process took us to one small contribution in Nietzsche's wider thinking on morality, this being his treatise entitled: "guilt, bad conscience and related matters", originally published in 1887 as part of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1996), hereafter *GM*.

GM was written as a metaethical investigation of where moral principles come from, and specifically an historicised account of the workings of good and evil. Our own limited engagement with Nietzsche was more in the vein of a descriptive morality, in that it was an analysis of a specific place and time when Australia was struggling to arrive at the appropriate (normative) standards of behaviour for living with its colonial past. Nietzsche came into our research because his arguments (about good and evil, ressentiment and slave morality) and his methodology (geneaology) gave us clues about how we might make sense of the complex moral restructuring that was occurring in (post)colonial Australia at that time. Of course, Nietzsche does not magically become part of the mix of accounting for certain processes in postcolonial Australia: he is connected to this geographical moment by myself and my collaborator who, at that time, were living and working in that postcolonial context. And he came to us as scholars by way of traceable pathways of reading and living networks of colleagues who were themselves finding new relevance for Nietzsche. I am, then, putting geography first in my account of "why Nietzsche?" (O"Hara, 1985). To do so is, in my view, part of a wider ethic of scholarship. For me the question of "why any philosopher?" is always also a question of whether or not it produces more sophisticated geographies.

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[2] A formal apology from the Australian nation was delivered to indigenous Australians as one of the first initiatives of the incoming Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. It was delivered as a motion to the Federal Parliament on 13 February 2008 and was telecast nation-wide. Many Australians gathered in public spaces to watch the event on large screens and those Aborigines who were not special guests in the Parliament that day travelled from all parts of the country to the lawns of Parliament House Canberra to receive the apology.

My choice of the adjective 'sophisticated' is deliberate for it captures the ambiguous effects I know to be produced among many of my colleagues by geographies that are self-consciously in conversation with philosophers (like, say, Nietzsche). The word 'sophisticated' has come to have a common use meaning as something that is worldly-wise, not naïve, complex, clever. Etymologically the word derives from the ancient Greek term 'sophic' (pertaining to knowledge) and to that earliest of scholar, the 'sophist' (one who was engaged in the pursuit and communication of knowledge). A common dictionary definition of the term 'sophistication' still carries such a positive sense. But the term 'sophistication' tilts also in another direction, towards the less positive notion of sophistry. Sophistry is the process of investing knowledge with fallacious or misleading argument. This negative meaning of 'sophistication' is itself derived from philosophy and, specifically, from the negative interpretation first Plato and then Aristotle gave to the project of the early sophists. Among other things the early sophists were teachers who, for a substantial fee, provided training in speaking persuasively.[3] As Susan Jarratt (1991, xv) notes, their credentials in teaching the art of rhetoric derived in part from their experiences of different cultures: "they believed and taught that notions of 'truth' had to be adjusted to fit the ways of a particular audience in a certain time and with a certain set of beliefs and laws". This model of knowledge was antithetical to the Aristotelian belief in wisdom as pertaining to permanent truths, and justified his division of rhetoric from the pursuit of other more probable or certain knowledges. The sophist's knowledge (rhetoric) was adulterated, disingenuously altered, a perversion and it stood in sharp relief to philosophy. Barbara Cassin (2000, 105) has referred to this as the process by which philosophy itself made the sophists into its negative alter ego, its "bad Other".

Nowadays, the sophist's sensitivity to difference would not necessarily result in their project being so negatively construed. Indeed, Jarratt's own positively inflected reclamation of the sophists turns upon the fact that they were "skeptical about a divine source of knowledge or value" and instead sensitive to knowledge as formed "in historically and geographically specific contexts" (1991, xx). One way of thinking about this is to say that the ancient sophists were both *geographers* and *philosophers*. Although it is also to admit that it was their geography – their emphasis on the situatedness of knowledge – that was their undoing in relation to later developments in philosophical thought. This arrangement stands in contrast to what we see in many contemporary geographies, in which it is their claim to being philosophical that can give rise to a scepticism among some readers. Indeed, when 'big theory' touches empirically grounded geographies indifferently or when 'big theory' seems to preclude doing empirically grounded geographies altogether, then the claim against such geographies may

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[3] It was the acquiring of fees which has, in some accounts, been offered as evidence of the fact that the sophists wielded knowledge in a self-interested fashion, as opposed to the deploying of knowledge in pursuit of 'higher' goals such as wisdom, virtue, even justice and democracy (Cassin, 2000, 106)

even be that they are a disingenuous alteration or perversion of the geographical project, a less genuine geography lacking reality or relevance. I might even rephrase the pertinent question as follows: is a sophisticated geography good or evil?

The relationship between good and evil was of course a specific concern for Friedrich Nietzsche, and much of his work was developing a critique of (modern) morality. The sophists played an important (if fragmentary) part in that emergent critique (see Consigny, 1994, for an overview) and he saw them as both "co-workers" and "precursors" to his own project. In the broad, Nietzsche's philosophical project was set against what he construed to be the deadening after-effects of Socratic and Platonic thinking and the advocacy of unconditional truths and dogmatic moral rules (Consigny, 1994, 11). Indeed in a replication of sophistical thinking, Nietzsche's methodology for returning to the sophists (his "genealogy") admitted partiality and interest (his position). His investigations were always presented as interpretation as opposed to truth and his writings celebrated the creativity of the agonistic, competitive rhetorical episteme within which the Sophists operated. In short, Nietzschean epistemology converged with the sophistic model of knowledge in that it was conditional and anchored in the specificities of situations. So too did his morality. The sophists, like Nietzsche, repudiated objective truth and, in so doing, relinquished the ability and right to discern and articulate dogmatic moral rules on how one ought to behave (Consigny, 1994, 16). Nietzsche read this as an explicit effect of geography. The sophists, he asserted, "juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value of judgments" (Nietzsche, 1968, 428).

What constitutes a moral geography in a world of difference has been an important thread within recent critical geographical thought (Sayer and Storper, 1997; Proctor and Smith, 1999; Smith, 1997, 1998, 2000). In geographical grapplings with the interface between moral philosophy and ethics, the role of geography (understood as a specific place or location) on moral thinking and practice has gathered considerable attention. Smith (2000, 99) calls this the "moral force of place". With a view that carries traces of sophist reasoning, Robert Sack (1997, 8) argues that geography is not only "at the foundation of moral judgment" but also that moral goals "must be set and justified by us in places as inhabitants of a world". As convenient as it might be for geographers to claim a moral geography on the basis of locational specificity alone, other geographical concerns have simultaneously required thinking more relationally and normatively. Indeed the tension between universalism and relativism has had emergent moral geographies navigating their way precariously between the solid rock of "universalism" and the slightly harder place of "particularism" (McDowell, 1995, 292). For example, Sack's admission of a place-based morality is tempered by his warning that if place (specificity) is too "thick" in the making of moral frameworks then they would be too partial, and foreclose upon a more transcendent view (Sack 1997, 257). David

Smith's (2000) sustained account of moral geographies grapples further with the fact of particularity and the desire for transcendence, by deciphering a "deeply geographical distinction in morality" between sympathy for the close and familiar (a morality of feeling) and concern for distant and different others (a morality of reason).

This essay does not seek to settle a course through this perilous terrain in order to prescribe parameters for the future practice of human geography – a normative morality. Rather it adds to the growing body of scholarship within the discipline on everyday moralities: "grounded, contextualized and…concrete" (Proctor, 1998, 11). Such geographies may be seen as mere descriptive moralities, but they bear immediately upon metaethical themes such as those Nietzsche was grappling with when he harnessed the sophists to his critique of the tradition of discerning timeless and placeless moral truths. When Haydie Gooder and I wrote our geography of reconciliation in postcolonial Australia our interest lay in charting the situated genealogy of moral claims and their uneven effects. The sophisticated genealogies of morality produced by Nietzsche provided a template and analytical guide for our work. His genealogies exposed the conditions by which moral worlds were made and lived, and charted the co-dependency between the descriptive particularity of moral claims and the universal drives (*interests*) of normative claims.

Nietzsche is often misinterpreted as being against morals, even against ethics. But his performed 'immorality' is only ever in relation to the specifics of what stands for morality in his time – what he considers to be a narrow morals. This includes Christianity most obviously. It also incorporates other breeds of modern morality such as the law and concepts of justice – many of which, in the West at least, are derivatives of Christian morality. This variant of morals, Nietzsche argues, restricts the ways in which we imagine ourselves, and ourselves in relation to others. This is why he is interested in the "genealogists of morality", not because he believes them or in their rules and codes ("they aren't good for anything", he says), but because he wants to situate and circumscribe their claims. *On the Genealogy of Morals* was a genealogy of those "genealogists" and his work provided a startling model for a psychology of the priestly class. In Nietzsche's use of the term "genealogy" we are seeing a critical historicising of the concept of morality in line with a more general methodology of de-naturalisation, subsequently taken up by Foucault. This is why Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (1998) translate the title of *On the Genealogy of Morals* to be *On the Genealogy of Morality*, thereby emphasising Nietzsche's interest in the conditions by which "morality" is produced and maintained and its effects. This was not so

much a question of the origins of morality but the *value* of morals and whether they obstruct or promote "human flourishing" (Nietzsche *GM* 1998). [4]

"Gloomy" emotional states like guilt and "bad conscience" come into view for Nietzsche because he believes them to be the outcome of "morality" or, more precisely, what Brian Leiter (2002) refers to as "morality in a pejorative sense." For Nietzsche these are symptomatic emotional states for they demonstrate the constraining hold of modern morality. Guilt, for example, he views as an auxiliary invention, a psychological accessory that secrets away and manages a range of more raw and unrestrained feelings that morality does not want to allow – this is why he interprets it as the "animal soul turned against itself" (*GM*). Guilt, Nietzsche observes, has its origins in the "pre-moral" notion of debt and the relationship of obligation established between buyer and seller – a relationship that was elaborated through the violent history of contract law in which suffering (a pound of flesh, say) could stand as a satisfying and satisfactory compensation for a debt not paid. And it is, at this point, important to register that the pleasure of that suffering is not solely in the hands of the creditor. Through the work of "bad conscience" the debtor too feels the cruel pleasurable relief of sacrificing, say, that pound of flesh. Such "bad things" become perverse preordinations of how we should relate, constraining the very terms by which we might act ethically and precluding the emergence of a more properly ethical – because openly relational, contingent and imaginative – world.

One moral geography

Nietzsche's ideas had immense resonance with my colleague, Haydie Gooder, and I in terms of what we were observing of settler-indigenous relations in Australia during the 1990s (Gooder and Jacobs 2000). At that time, Australia was actively engaged in a state-sanctioned process for thinking, speaking and enacting settler-Aboriginal relations differently: this was the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation was a political process best understood as expressing something of what Judith Butler (1997) might refer to as a "psychic life", in this case of a post-colonising national subjectivity. It included talk about material recompense around dispossession of land, but that material calculation was overtly linked to other calculations about other injuries experienced by Aboriginal society under colonisation. Centrally, it included acknowledging the emotional and cultural damage that was wrought upon Aboriginal communities by the long history of Aboriginal children being taken into institutional care by the state and various church agencies. The history of 'the Stolen Generations' and the cultural and

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[4] Although Nietzsche's method of genealogy is said to have been the model for Foucault's non-essentialist, post-origins historico-philosophical method, Leiter (2002, 166-7) has questioned this on the grounds that Nietzsche sought to provide a 'real history of morality'.

emotional injury it caused Aboriginal society was central to the reworking of settler-indigenous relations at that time.

At the contentious heart of the reconciliation process was the matter of an apology. In 1997 an Inquiry by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families had been released in a report entitled *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia 1997). The Inquiry investigated the painful consequences of the forced removal, in the name of assimilation, of 'half-caste' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and homes. The Inquiry into 'the Stolen Generation' brought into public view a previously hidden part of the nation's history. In one of its many and wide-ranging recommendations, the Inquiry called for those involved in forced removals (governments, churches, police forces and welfare agencies) to apologise to indigenous Australians. Many agencies did apologise, although the then conservative (Liberal) Federal Government failed to deliver what indigenous Australians felt to be a properly worded apology. Although they acknowledged past wrongs, they always located responsibility for these wrongs in the colonial past and never uttered the all important word 'sorry'. For many indigenous Australians the failure to say 'sorry' was a central deficiency, as it precluded admission of responsibility and, significantly, the right for Aboriginal people to then offer forgiveness in return. Haydie Gooder and I set about documenting the way in which the failure of the Federal Government to deliver a 'proper' apology brought together large numbers of settler Australians in a collective expression of sympathy towards Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. This is a group we dubbed the 'sorry people'. In the absence of a proper national apology there was a proliferation of 'minor' apologies, an unprecedented outpouring of popular sympathy toward indigenous Australians. Throughout the 1990s, streets were crowded with whites marching to remember the Stolen Generations, people queued to sign sorry books, local organisations held reconciliation football carnivals, and many non-Aboriginal Australians confused by these new revelations about their nation's past voluntarily attended reconciliation workshops where they were re-taught the history of the nation from an indigenous perspective. This pedagogical function is a kind of "mnemotechnic," a device for assisting the memory, and it somewhat clumsily seeks to replace an unconscious imprint of a nation properly formed, with a consciousness of the real history of the nation. Such remembering was an essential precursor, for an apology requires the offender to "recall" and be "mindful" of the past so that he or she might move on to a restored state of being (Tavuchis 1991, 8). For Tavuchis the proper apology "acknowledge[s] the fact of wrong doing, accept[s] ultimate responsibility, express[es] sincere sorrow and regret, and promise[s] not to repeat the offence" (1991, vii). In this sense, reconciliation asks that the past be revisited in the hope that this process might ordain a new future (Nietzsche 1998, 61). Reconciliation both actively reflects on the past and attempts to achieve mastery by way of what Nietzsche described as "the whole somber thing called reflection" (1998, 62).

In Nietzschean terms, remembering settler violations against indigenous people is central to the inversion required by a postcolonial imaginary. The racist structure of colonial Australia had white settler Australians securely positioned as superior (high-minded, civilised, 'good') and Aboriginal Australians as inferior (low-minded, less or even uncivilised, 'bad'). For Nietzsche this structure holds in place because of what he dubs the "pathos of distance": that feeling that one can *be* superior because one *is* superior and *is* good. The reconciliation pedagogies closed that distance, and through the new intimacies produced by knowing about colonial violations the attribution of good (settler) and bad (native) inverts: there is a transvaluation of values. Suddenly, whole swathes of settler Australians began to question the moral rightness of their nation's beginnings.

Sorry people were, then, settler Australians who, in the face of revelations about Australia's hidden (we might say actively forgotten or repressed) colonial past, came to feel they had lost the Australia they once knew and loved. They assumed not only feelings of guilt but also the mantle of responsibility for assuaging the legitimacy of their national subjectivity being compromised. They began to experience a form of settler melancholia, an unresolved grief for a lost idea of nation. Judith Butler's adaptation of the Freudian diagnosis of melancholia to understand subjectivity is useful here. She describes the way in which melancholia establishes itself in relation to the loss of an external object or ideal (1997, 179). In melancholia, there is a refusal to break the original attachment to the lost object or ideal and it becomes internalised, drawn into the ego, which absorbs both the love and the rage felt towards the lost object/ideal. This reconfiguration of the "topography of the ego" results in self-beratement and guilt (a form of narcissism). In this sense, melancholia substitutes "for an attachment that is broken, gone, or impossible" (Butler 1997, 24). The proliferation of apologies from settler 'sorry people' is a symptom of this melancholic entrapment. Their sense of guilt or "bad conscience" fuelled their excessive work of sorry saying as they sought to recover an idea of a moral national subjectivity. Gooder and I interpreted this state of melancholic subjection as an important postcolonial moment, for through this guilt Aboriginal Australians are relationally empowered. Thinking in Nietzschean terms, settler Australians suddenly see Aboriginal Australians as "injured creditors" to whom they are indebted. In the eyes of the guilt-afflicted settler it is Aborigines alone who hold the power to end their suffering by, say, accepting their apologies and offering forgiveness.

Our original investigations into this postcolonial reversal held some reservations about the ultimate effect of this inversion. Guided by a Nietzschean method of genealogy, we understood that what we were observing in Australian reconciliation was not simply emotions entering politics, or a joyous postcolonial inversion of settler-Aboriginal relations of duty, but the making and re-making of morality in a specific geographical context. And while the effect of that morality was to relationally empower indigenous Australians *vis á vis* some guilt-afflicted

settlers, it was at the same time – with all its politely restrained concepts of reconciliation and its transactions of apologies and forgiveness – a consolidation, extension and elaboration of the Christian moral codes that had, from first contact, so shaped the nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations.

It is worth dwelling on what this means in terms of the creative potential of the moral restructuring postcolonial Australians are currently engaged in. As I have indicated, one of the key genealogies charted in *GM* is that of Christian morals. Nietzsche argues that Christian morality emerged among a class of oppressed as a self-interested reaction to, and challenge against, the social and economic domination of the Roman Empire. Through the creation of Christian values the oppressors and their moral world was de-valued. In short, Christianity, he argued, is a revaluation of values driven by the *ressentiment* felt by the oppressed to the oppressor and he implies (although this aspect is under-developed) that this was a postcolonial manoeuvre. In comprehending this reversal of fortunes Nietzsche is careful to make clear that transformation comes in the form of re-*action*, charged by the logics of *ressentiment*.

I have already flagged the memory work that attached itself to reconciliation. And I have also already suggested how the melancholic mood felt by 'sorry people' appears to position such guilt-ridden settlers in a relation of deference to the newly acquired power (to forgive) held by indigenous Australians. In short, some of the memory work going on through reconciliation in contemporary Australia is about de-valuing the structure of good and evil held within pre-revisionist histories of the nation. In so doing it is a reaction to the *ressentiment* of indigenous Australians towards colonial pasts. But does this restructuring deliver a joyous postcolonial moment? Reconciliation remains a "gloomy thing" and not just because once empowered settler Australians now feel less legitimate. It is "gloomy" because the moral infrastructure that Aboriginal *ressentiment* has delivered is already held within the very Christian morality that colonialism delivered. The structure of guilt and forgiveness encapsulated in the apology testifies to this. The drive to create an 'on record' apology is proof of a settler subject actively transforming him or herself from 'colonialist' into that fantasized subject of the postcolonial nation. And, as Tavuchis has noted, individuals and collectives who apologize "promiscuously and excessively" often lack a sense of "autonomy" and "firm social identity" (Tavuchis 1991, 40). Perhaps it is unsurprising that one newspaper inadvertently referred to Sorry Day as "a national day of atonement" (*The Age* 19 May 1998). Such a slip confirms that standing centre stage of such apologetic re-action was not the sorrow of The Stolen Generation, but the desire of those settler Australians for absolution for past sins.

The reason that Nietzsche embarked on his genealogy of morality was in order to clear away moral orders that he felt prevented the emergence of a more imaginative ethical creativity. Haydie Gooder and I shared that interest and that

moral goal when we too set about investigating closely the situated circumstance of Australia's postcolonial moral restructuring. It might well be that the kind of moral world of which reconciliation is a part – structured as it is out of ressentiment, requiring as it does the internalised bad conscience, and drawing as it then must on a dance of apology and reparation – can only deprive us of the kinds of forces that are needed to cease being reactive and to move beyond colonialism (Deleuze, 1986). Although the process of reconciliation has done much to recognise indigenous experiences of colonialism and to restructure the sentiment of the nation, it cannot herald a more radical relational ethics. That becoming will be forestalled until Australians release themselves from the straightjacket of morality that constrains not only the work we do in the name of postcolonial sentiment, but also the work we do in the name of so-called postcolonial justice.

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