RESSENTIMENT, RADICALISM, VIOLENCE: ON CONSEQUENCES OF COMPENSATORY ALTERATIONS OF VALUES

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Abstract

The article comprises an attempt of an analysis of the phenomenon of compensatory transformations of values and tries to demonstrate how such transformations can lead to fundamentalism, fanaticism, radicalism, and extremism. The aim of this analysis is to sketch the conditions in which compensatory alteration of values could entail violence.

Key words: *ressentiment, inferiority, compensatory hatred, alterations of values, fundamentalism, radicalism, extremism*

Re-valuation of values is one of the key issues in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, most often raised in the context of countering nihilism. (Since certain values lead to nihilism it is necessary to reject those values and introduce others in their place so as to guard against it. This is what is commonly meant as Nietzsche's idea of re-valuation of values). In this article we will concern ourselves with another kind of re-valuation or alteration of value (also very important for Nietzsche's philosophy and psychology) – namely ressentiment-based alteration of values which, in our opinion, is at the core of compensatory hatred (in this article this term is a synonym of *ressentiment*). We understand *ressentiment* as a hatred (which may be, naturally and usually, though not necessarily always in the same combination, accompanied by related emotions: envy, jealousy, Schadenfreude, desire for retribution, etc.) directed towards a certain way of life or people who live in that way (who identify themselves through this certain system of values), and arising out of a defensive devaluation (aiming to combat a feeling of inferiority) of some activity, desires, goals or values (or even characteristics of people who share those); a hatred (and accompanying emotions) whose originator has felt devalued or less valued as a result of being enveloped by this feeling. This devaluation is associated with a correspondingly strong valuing up of such activities, desires, goals, values and so on, as allow him to build up a conviction of his own superiority. A defensive devaluing of desires, goals and values - this is the name we give to the key issue we will be examining here. Often we also call it a compensating alteration of systems of values since values which most often exist within systems, so too most often change within those systems and through their own alteration force further alteration of other values with which they are associated (Posłuszny 2012, p. 9).

One of the most important elements of the theory of compensatory alterations of values (defensive devaluation of certain values and subsequent valuing up of opposite ones) is inferiority which hurts, and everyone wants to escape the pain. Everyone wants to be better than others; such is the banal foundation, variously expressed. (It is everywhere, while its most complete image can be most often found in the psychology of the self. It is called by many names but it is not difficult to draw out, from beyond all this various terminology, a rudimentary reluctance towards perceiving oneself as worse). If we should prove inferior to others in the pursuit of a goal (realising a value) then a great suffering arises within us and it needs to be combated. This may be done by either targeting inferiority itself and, naturally, its psychological consequences, or by targeting only the feeling of being inferior. By inferiority we mean the particular weakness which has brought on failure, if that was indeed the source of the failure since it may just as well have been brought on by a stroke of coincidence rather than one's own resources coming up short. Naturally we cannot concern ourselves with coincidences here. Neither are we going to be interested in a realistic, that is rooted in reality, form of compensation for our own shortcomings. Instead, we are going to concern ourselves with the assault on feelings of inferiority and the fight against not our weaknesses and failure as such but against the values which, together with the failure itself, serve to expose our weaknesses and engender feelings of inferiority. *Ressentiment* is a weapon in this fight.

Failure (which engenders feelings of inferiority), negative reaction to failure (or failures)[1], and the naturally understandable associated suffering, pain and unhappiness – this is the starting point for it all. The answer to *ressentiment* which arises under such circumstances is speedy, unrealistic compensation. That which in the person's mind is associated with the failure will be de-valued - it must be made unimportant. Once it becomes unimportant, then the failure itself will become unimportant. As in rationalisation, this is probably the simplest and most common defence of the Self. There is nothing particularly interesting in it, so long as it remains incidental; so long as the de-valuation it demands is momentary and, we may say, is quickly forgotten. If its alteration of the Self last for more than just a short while, however, then it is possible that *ressentiment* appears. The destructiveness of its effects is rooted in this re-valuation. (The re-valuing of values, as wrote Nietzsche, understanding the term „values" so broadly that it may contain everything that is important to people - desires, goals, meanings, etc. This is how we would like to understand it and this is how broadly we take the term „values" - and not only when referring to Nietzsche's concept). This destructiveness is of course not a definite, merely a possibility, but in time it becomes increasingly probable and may involve particularly interesting phenomena such as radicalism, fanaticism, extremism, and terrorism. We will try to clarify this by showing how the re-valuating mechanism works and what troublesome consequences it may bring on. We would like to call on Nietzsche since something he has written becomes important to us here: "Would anyone like to have a little look down into the secret of how *ideals are fabricated* on this earth? Who has enough pluck? … Come on! Here we have a clear glimpse into this dark workshop. (...) I cannot see anything but I can hear all the better. There is a guarded, malicious little rumour-mongering and whispering from every nook and cranny. I think people are telling lies; a sugary mildness clings to every sound. Lies are turning weakness into an *accomplishment*, no doubt about it – it's just as you said. (...) And impotence which doesn't retaliate is being turned into "goodness"; timid baseness is being turned into "humility"; submission to people one hates is being turned into "obedience" (actually towards someone who, they say, orders this submission – they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed, his standing-by-the-door, his inevitable position of having to wait, are all given good names such as "patience", also known as *the* virtue; not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-wanting-to-take-revenge, it might even be forgiveness. (...) They are also talking about "loving your enemies" – and sweating while they do it. (...) They are miserable, without a doubt, all these rumour-mongers and clandestine forgers, even if they do crouch close together for warmth – but they tell me that their misery means they are God's chosen and select, after all, people beat the dogs they love best; perhaps this misery is just a preparation, a test, a training, it might be even more than that – something that will one day be balanced up and paid back with enormous interest in gold, no! in happiness. (...) They are now informing me that not only are they better than the powerful, the masters of the world whose spittle they have to lick (*not* from fear, not at all from fear! but because God orders them to honour those in authority) – not only are they better, but they have a "better time", or at least will have a better time one day." (Nietzsche 2006, pp. 27-28)

Let us clarify this using the example of powerlessness which is turned into "goodness." According to Nietzsche's attack on Christianity, expressed so well in the book quoted above, "goodness" is understood here to mean repaying evil with good. So we have not "good for good" or "evil for evil" but rather "good for good" and "good for evil." This is what Christians would like and Nietzsche explains how, not capable of "evil for evil", they instead bring to life a perverted quintessence of their

[1] It is difficult to categorically state whether one failure is enough or perhaps many accumulated failures are required. Max Scheler (1978, p.4), in his famous description of *ressentiment*, appears to suggest the accumulation of failures. ("*Ressentiment* is spiritual self-poisoning which has rather well established causes and effects. It is a lasting psychological attitude that arises out of regular suppression of the discharge of emotions and reactions which are in themselves normal and part of human nature. It results in a lasting tendency towards certain illusions as to relative value and corresponding value judgements. Emotions and passions which need to be immediately considered here include the desire for and an impulse towards vengeance, hatred, spite, envy, malice."). We suspect that this correlation is highly individual and depends to a large degree on the psycho-axiological make-up of the individual who suffers the failure.

value system, i.e. "love" towards enemies. How is such a shift possible? Three values are at play here: power, powerlessness and "goodness." Insufficient power engenders powerlessness which must be perceived as valuable and so is turned into "goodness." Nietzsche believes that everyone desires power and its inherent value is instilled in us by Nature, which is ruled by will to power. Power is everywhere, even in the re-valuation of powerlessness. It is not enough that will to "goodness" simply be substituted for will to power. Such a substitution must be validated and this validation or empowerment of this shift must be fundamentalist.

Let us remember that it is employed in the defence of a particularly important component of the system of the Self, that is positive self-evaluation. Let us assume that Nietzsche is right when he states that will to power is the universal propelling principle or motivating basis of human action. This is the only aspect of our understanding of the will to power which is of importance in this sketch. Nietzsche assigns a very broad meaning to „the will to power"; far broader than what may be the sum of its constituent meanings including the most common (usually broadest) ones. It includes such forms of being as to which we may not be able to assign any will, and connects to power what we may be given to associate with its opposite. Within the concept of *ressentiment* which interests us here, this idea is used more or less as various kinds of that which may be broadly taken as a need for positivity are used in psychology or sociology. This psychological aspect of the will to power will be of interest to us here. Indeed, an even narrower understanding of the drive to gain an advantage may suffice, one which engenders a positive self-evaluation, positive self-image and affirmation of the self. Even such a very narrow understanding of a tiny shred of the will to power (really a minute piece, although perhaps the most important one in terms of the study of human activity) will be enough to grasp the sense of the *ressentiment* theory.

The consequence of man being equipped with such a desire (for power, advantage, victory, ability to overcome any obstacles) should be a negative reaction to one's own powerlessness. Negatively valued powerlessness (which assumes a positive valuation of its opposite, as explained by the concept of the will to power) needs to become a positively valued goodness ("hidden powerlessness") as a result of resentment-fuelled revaluation. This process requires a devaluation of power (and, simultaneously, of the will to power) and this de-valuation requires validation. Attacking that which the subject desired, but which he is no longer allowed or able to desire (following his failure and, significantly, fearing more failures) is a key element of the process which concerns us here due to the nature of validation. It is easier to validate a condemnation of values which we ourselves never espoused but more difficult to use validation as a weapon against something which has formed us. In such a situation we require stronger validation, coming from somewhere radically outside the subject's own perspective, such as the discovery of a generally applicable and thus incontestable reason for the shift (incontestable due to the apparent power of this broad application.) Such validation can go much further than simply justifying the shift through a metamorphosis of simple wants. Exchanging negative valuation of powerlessness for negative valuation of power and positive valuation of powerlessness cannot be justified by anything that applies solely to the changing subject. Why not? Because it would be quite easy to lose faith in what this alteration brings. (In Nietzsche negative valuation of powerlessness, positive valuation of power and negative valuation of the will to power are all naturally connected. He attempted to express this entire process through the metaphor of exchanging powerlessness for "goodness").

It is easier to compare the Old Self to the Current Self than ever the Self to an Absolute which orders reality through the imperative of incomparable status, among others: "nothing can compare with him." (We may expect that this „Old Self" - prior to the re-valuing - will be most often constructed ex-post out of rememberings and imaginings. This happens subsequent to the re-valuing, and is used to justify *ressentiment* values which of course are always in need of an enemy, and are reactive). Taking any given valuation out of the context of possible comparisons lends it a degree of security. In the case of valuations which serve compensation, security is particularly important since he who must resort to compensation must have experienced some trouble with the security of his Self and is naturally super-sensitive to this issue, as is anyone who has experienced something he wishes not to experience. Absolutist validation demolishes any competition: "nothing can compare to the Absolute." Fundamentalist validations must destroy not just the most natural of individual and group validations

relating to the Self and its environment; they have in their crosshairs all that is different, all "others." Such fundamentalism is radically expansive since it is fuelled by fear: "enemy is lying in wait everywhere" and "peace can only be brought on by broad offensive." Individual validations confronted by fundamentalist ones mean nothing and comparing them "has no sense." Sensible comparisons, even an ability to compare, are intrinsically dangerous to validation so this danger is done away with through fundamentalism, behind which hides a fear greater than the one connected with weakness when someone weaker confronts someone stronger. This fear stems not from one or two confrontations of weakness against power, which may end up in failure. It is an existential fear which ends up in the collapse of one of the pillars of the system of the Self - self-affirmation. That is why a cannon gets used to shoot a fly, one might say "just in case." In such circumstances of confrontation of Absolute against individual, and of fundamentalist validation against individual ones which do not go beyond that which is their source, i.e. the individual, fundamentalism wins through disproportionate status. Compensatory transformation works. The trouble with *ressentiment* begins with a contest of validations which carry a similar status - when fundamentalisms clash. Disproportionate status no longer offers any protection here, which it so conveniently does in the previous case. Now it is a clash of equals, an Absolute against another Absolute: validations with the highest status. Here it is not possible to leave the context of comparisons quite as easily as before when individual validations ("yes", "I want it", "I need this", etc.) are faced with fundamentalist ones ("this is the wish of the Almighty", "such is the nature of things", etc.). Such a confrontation binds *ressentiment* with fundamentalism, by way of defense of ressentiment-based validations through disproportionate status. When it comes to a confrontation of fundamentalist validations of value, however, it is not possible to prevent a clash by forcing one of the rivals out of his circle of context. When two Absolutes square off, there is no "higher reality" outside of that circle of context. The defense mechanism which lies at the base of compensatory transformation of values - let us call it a "fundamentalisation" of validation of values as a means of compensation - cannot work here since it is not possible to demonstrate any disproportion in status: all validations claim the status of absolute truth.

Where fundamentalism is not able to defend values and their validation there is still a place for fanaticism, for a sharpening of faith in the values and in their validation. Fundamentalism defends ressentiment-based values and their validations against doubt, which might appear as a consequence of a contest of validations. In fact, it defends them against potential danger. Fanaticism, on the other hand, defends them against actual danger so when it appears it is because actual danger (doubt) has appeared, rather than turning up in case doubt might appear (which is how fundamentalism is expected to work.) Fanaticism is bound to *ressentiment* not by necessity, as is the case with fundamentalism - without which it is difficult to imagine a successful resentiment-based revaluing of values, but rather because of difficulties in maintaining those ressentiment-based values. It is not a coincidence that these two phenomena, fundamentalism and fanaticism, are frequently bound to each-other and difficult to separate. In theory it is easy to separate faith in the capturing of absolute truth from emotional engagement in the spreading that absolute truth. In reality this is far more difficult, not least because fundamentalism contains an imperative of radical engagement. This, we have to agree, is rather natural since fundamentalists' messages are of extreme importance and the gravity of those messages has the effect of propelling towards stronger faith. So, fanaticism may accompany fundamentalism in good times as well as when nihilism (loss of faith) may be imminent. We are particularly interested here in fanaticism which accompanies fundamentalism in its tough times. It is not difficult fathom the characteristics of this faith, sharpened as it were in an hour of need. These would include what is most important in *ressentiment*, that is hatred in its most extreme forms. (Unless validations of a ressentiment-based system of values require a renouncement of hatred, as in Nietzsche's most famous example.) When there is trouble with maintaining a ressentiment-based system of values, the compensating hatred which lies at its base may manifest itself more violently. It is now perhaps possible to anticipate where we are heading with this trouble with *ressentiment*, in its most interesting form as it is the most dangerous one. Indeed, we would like to demonstrate how it may generate phenomena commonly considered as particularly dangerous: radicalism, extremism and, rooted in it, politically engaged violence. Such connections, especially in the context of the Self's defense

mechanisms, do not require of us any great powers of imagination, especially as three researchers (Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter) had already drawn them over a half-century ago. Their research project[2] and the resulting, famous, publication *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* showed how increased proselytizing activity may be put in the service of reduction of doubt which could be affecting an important element of the system of values - the beliefs which support the valuing, as in the case of the group of the ”Chosen” studied by Festinger, Riecken and Schachter. Even considering the criticism of this research (Dein 2001, pp. 384-385; Stone 2009, pp. 76-81) it would be difficult to step from the possibility of reduction of cognitive dissonance through action to it being a necessary reality. We do not, however, require such powerful theses and the possibility is quite enough.

Let us return to the downward slope of *ressentiment*. Fundamentalism supports a collapsing self-affirmation and in turn serves as the base for a revaluing. When fundamentalist validations of ressentiment-based values begin to crumble, fanaticism may come to the rescue (here we may begin to detect mechanisms described by social psychologists whose work we have visited.) When fanaticism itself gets into trouble, when mere psychological activity (a sharpening of faith) is not enough, action may be called in to help, as suggested by Festinger’s research. When the strengthening of faith through action is accompanied by the cocktail of emotions which are the subject of our interest here, i.e. when there is an attempt to reduce doubt through action (a particular kind of self-proselytization) our Ressentiment Man, filled with hatred, jealousy, desire for vengeance, Schadenfreude, and so on, may find that he has cross-bred fanatical faith with sudden, destructive violence. This is the source of much current concern in the context of expressions of aggression associated with ”denigrated Islam” and is a phenomenon which has been much studied from the perspective of *ressentiment* by researchers of ideologically motivated violence (Scruton 2002; Langman & Morris 2002). Much depends on the constituent parts of the particular system of values. If the system contains values which ”combat” violence, such a dangerous hybrid of faith and destruction may not come to be, as in Nietzsche’s ”model”, in the ”dark workshop of counterfeiters of values.” We should not, however, take this original description too literally since it could be taken to mean that weakness must be associated with broadly-understood goodness (aimed at reaching all that is inoffensive), since such a weakness transformed into goodness does not offend anyone and thus does not place the weaker party in difficult circumstances with which he may not be able to cope. This is merely a pattern, illustrated with an example which is meant to speak to the imaginations of ”the Christian West.” The raft of incarnations of this form is so vast that it is not possible to predict the concrete shape which this particular brand of *ressentiment* may take. Particular case conditions are the deciding factors. These include individual predisposition, the nature of the original impulse generating the compensating transformation of values, and many other factors, besides. *Ressentiment* may bind to anything, and while violence inhibitors may be contained within the ressentiment-based system of values, they do not have to be. Love and hatred are equally as likely to be demonstrated (in any form) and *ressentiment* may be the enemy of violence as much as its promoter. (Powerlessness does not imply inability and unwillingness to use violence; *ressentiment* may actively seek vengeance as it collapses.) If it is possible to justify violence in the context of a ressentiment-based system of values, to include it in the circle of validations, (and we should expect it, given humans’ enormous creative capacities when it comes to justifying troublesome behaviours) then such justification is most likely in ”the hour of need”, when fanaticism is no longer sufficient in the defense of ressentiment-based values against the encroaching doubt.

[2] The most important part of this research is a covert participant observation (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter 2008, pp. 236-253) carried out in order to study the behaviour of members of a small group of fervent believers in the prophecies of Marian Keech (who had foretold the destruction of the World in a massive flood, and whose followers would be saved by a flotilla of flying saucers from the planet Clarion) in the face of the failure of the prophecy to come to pass. Many of them had made substantial sacrifices (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter 2008, pp. 77-84).

These may, though do not have to be the consequences of collapse of ressentiment-based systems of values. We can take the optimist's view when discussing *ressentiment* although as we consider the likely future intensity of expressions of *ressentiment*, we cannot quite free ourselves of pessimism. If the vision of connections between *ressentiment* and fundamentalism, nihilism and fanaticism which we have drawn in this sketch has any reflection in reality, then given the conditions prevalent in our times, we should expect an escalation of *ressentiment*. Precisely due to the environment in which we have come to live - an environment which is not kind towards fundamentalist approaches to life. Those have been described and debated in numerous discussions of so-called post-modernism.

When we place mechanisms of compensating transformation of values in this environment, it becomes easy to explain the sudden recent proliferation of its dangerous consequences - fanaticism, radicalism, extremism and terrorism. The cause lies in the environment; an environment hostile towards fundamentalism, where relativism is rife not as a competing vision of life but as a natural lifestyle, enforced by the environment in the same way as are all adaptations. In this environment fundamentalist validations of values fall more readily than at other times. Under these circumstances, defense of the validation of compensating systems of values - as described here - becomes a necessity. It turns out, we are living in a time which is not kind to *ressentiment* and so it is more than a little conducive to the consequences of its poor condition. If there is even a little truth in the concept we have tried to sketch out here, we know how the trouble with *ressentiment* may end, and why. Proliferation of radicalism, fanaticism, extremism and terrorism is easily understood from the perspective of ressentiment-based transformation of values during a time of "mass supply of points of view" which do not bode well for fundamentalism. Further, the concept presented here suggests that as number of available perspectives increases at times, we should expect a corresponding increase in the trouble with consequences of compensatory alterations of values.

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