7   **Hermeneutics**

Nietzschean Approaches

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The term "hermeneutics" appears only three times in Nietzsche's notebooks and never in his published works. Nonetheless, Nietzsche's texts are fertile sources of ideas, concepts, and arguments that intersect with the hermeneutical tradition. This chapter will chart several key points of contact between Nietzsche and the hermeneutical tradition.

Taken broadly, hermeneutics is the interpretation of meaningful entities. This raises two sets of questions. First, what is the *range* of hermeneutics? That is, what are the appropriate objects toward which an interpretive stance should be directed? Second, what is the *nature and methodology* of interpretation? What are we doing when we interpret phenomena? What kinds of explanation are provided? What kinds of understanding are achieved?

Nietzsche addresses both sets of questions. To the first, concerning hermeneutics' range, his answer appears to be: everything. It is not just texts, works of art, and so forth that demand interpretation, but something like the totality of human experience. Nietzsche's texts are replete with remarks on the pervasiveness of interpretation. Within a few dozen pages of *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, he tells us that physics is "only an interpretation" of the world (BGE 22); that the Cartesian cogito "contains an interpretation of the process, and does not belong to the process itself" (BGE 17); that philosophical concepts and "world-interpretations" are constrained and channeled by the grammatical structure of the thinker's language (BGE 20); that modern morality represents "an odd narrowness of interpretation" (BGE 32); that an action's intention is "merely a sign and a symptom that still requires interpretation" (BGE 32); and one could go on and on.[1]

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If the range of hermeneutics is the whole of human experience, hermeneutic's methods are equally broad. Nietzsche tells us that the philosopher

> must have been critic and skeptic and dogmatist and historian and also poet and collector and traveler and solver of riddles and moralist and seer and "free spirit" and almost everything in order to pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and to be *able* to see with many different eyes and consciences, from a height and into every distance, from the depths into every height, from a nook into every expanse. (BGE 211)

For, if we seek understanding, we should aim for

> resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations … to see differently in this way for once, and to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future "objectivity" … There is *only* a perspective "knowing" and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be. (GM III:12)[2]

Interpretation, whether of values or other entities, requires comprehensive knowledge, diverse abilities, and the capacity to switch between divergent perspectives.

As these tantalizing remarks indicate, Nietzsche is deeply concerned with the way in which human beings interpret phenomena. But, as I'll explain below, he also wants to draw attention to the ways in which seemingly uninterpreted phenomena, seemingly given experiences, have already been interpreted. And he wants to highlight the ways in which some of these interpretations have been *damaging*: "Wherever the theologians' instinct extends, *value judgments* have been stood on their heads and the concepts of 'true' and 'false' are of necessity reversed: whatever is most harmful to life

is called 'true'; whatever elevates, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it triumphant is called 'false'" (A 9).[3] Many of his works are devoted to this task.

So we have three points: the *range* of interpretation is something like the totality of human experience; the *methods* of interpretation include capacious knowledge as well as reversals of perspective; and interpretive skill is needed because many of our current interpretations are profoundly *damaging.* In this chapter, I'll provide a brief overview of these matters. I'll begin with a traditional way of classifying Nietzsche in relation to hermeneutics: he is often seen as offering a hermeneutics of suspicion. Finding this characterization potentially misleading, I then provide, in the second section, a discussion of Nietzsche's interpretive stance. The third section reviews Nietzsche's philosophical methodology and his objections to more traditional philosophical approaches. The fourth section discusses Nietzsche's interpretation of modernity as a whole as tending toward nihilism. The fifth section offers some brief reflections on the way in which Nietzsche influenced other thinkers in the hermeneutical tradition.

A HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION?

When Nietzsche is put in relation to the hermeneutical tradition, he is often characterized as offering a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The phrase derives from Paul Ricœur, who famously claimed that Nietzsche, along with Marx and Freud, belonged to a "school of suspicion." I'll begin my discussion by considering whether and in what sense this label might be helpful.

Ricœur says that what's distinctive of Nietzsche, along with Freud and Marx, is that "all three clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting.*"[4] These thinkers inaugurate a new interpretive method that consists in demystifying phenomena and revealing their true meanings. Thus, simplistically, Nietzsche tries to show that what look like attempts

to serve God or secure human flourishing are really just attempts to express and maintain power. What makes this a distinctive interpretive method, for Ricœur, is the way in which it works back from and undoes falsification: "the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the man of guile."[5] Nietzsche, for example, "looks for the key to lying and masks on the side of" those who propound values.[6] So we first locate the ways in which phenomena have been deliberately obscured; we then try to clear away these distortions, working in reverse.

How accurate is this as a characterization of Nietzsche? In one sense, it's clearly true that Nietzsche adopts a suspicious stance toward phenomena that other philosophers take at face value. Nietzsche certainly does reject the stock interpretations of morality, agency, metaphysics, and so on; he certainly thinks these are superficial and need to be corrected.[7] But being suspicious of past philosophical interpretations is hardly distinctive; one of the abiding tropes in philosophy is the presentation of oneself as correcting all the failings of previous philosophers. Moreover, Ricœur's claims about the correction of deliberate falsification are exaggerations: while Nietzsche sometimes does present himself as revealing the way in which phenomena have been *willfully* misdescribed, this comprises only a small portion of his writings (e.g., a few sections of the *Genealogy* and *The Antichrist*). In terms of sheer volume, this material is swamped by the writings that aim at correcting errors, revealing misconceptions, putting forth new ideals, diagnosing cultural pathologies, and so forth. With a few key exceptions, Nietzsche thinks that falsification and distortion are rarely *deliberate*.

So we need to be more precise about what a hermeneutics of suspicion would be. Brian Leiter articulates a common interpretation of it: he writes that a hermeneutics of suspicion identifies the "causal forces that *explained* the conscious phenomena precisely because they laid bare the true *meaning* of those phenomena: I don't *really* want lots of money, I want the *love* I never got as a child; survivors have no moral claim on an inheritance, but it is in the interests of the

ruling classes that we believe they do, and so on."[8] In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion is often interpreted as a stance which discounts the agent's conscious understanding of a phenomenon and instead uncovers the *real and conflicting* cause of that phenomenon.

This, however, is too simplistic. We can see this already in the clichéd examples that Leiter offers: the idea that avowed motives often differ from attributed motives is just a truism, familiar since antiquity. If all that it takes to offer a hermeneutics of suspicion is to reiterate this truism, then every theologian who emphasizes the hidden sinfulness of human beings, every philosopher who worries about whether purportedly altruistic acts are actually selfish, every economist who distinguishes between expressed and revealed preferences, every novelist whose characters are not paragons of self-understanding should count. Clearly Nietzsche is doing more than this.

Now, at one level it's obvious that Nietzsche is interested in the distinction between the way things seem to a subject and the way things seem to a more perceptive, more historically sensitive observer. Thus, Ricœur writes that Nietzsche makes "the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness."[9] Certainly, there is some truth to this: Nietzsche writes, "actions are *never* what they appear to be [...] all actions are essentially unknown."[10] "We are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law 'each is furthest from himself' applies to all eternity" (GM Preface 1). So Nietzsche does suggest that self-ignorance and perhaps even self-deception are pervasive.

But there are two ways of misinterpreting this. First, we might think, with Leiter and others, that Nietzsche is discounting the conscious interpretations and treating the non-conscious meanings as the *true* or *real* meanings. But this simply doesn't fit with his texts, which consistently emphasize the importance of conscious misinterpretations:

> important as it may be to know the motives from which
> humanity has acted so far, it might be even more essential to

know the *belief* people had in this or that motive, i.e. what humanity has imagined and told itself to be the real lever of its conduct so far. For people's inner happiness and misery has come to them depending on their belief in this or that motive – *not* through the actual motives. The latter are of second-order interest. (GS 44)[11]

This is just one passage, but it is characteristic of Nietzsche's works: the fact that a conscious interpretation is distorting, superficial, or falsifying does not entail that it can be ignored, that we could understand the agent in isolation from these distortions. A few sections later, Nietzsche writes that

what things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the worth, the usual weight and measure of a thing – originally almost always something mistaken and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress … has, through the belief in it and its growth from generation to generation, slowly grown onto and into the thing and has become its very body: what started as appearance in the end nearly always becomes essence and functions [*wirkt*] as essence! […] Let us not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and presumptions in order to create new "things." (GS 58)

People are interpreting animals, and the interpretations often distort their object. But these distortions are not idle: they influence the nature of the interpreted object. To conceive of ourselves as sinful, for example, doesn't make it so: but it does alter our relationship to our own activities, the emotions that we experience, the cultural institutions that we take part in, the values that we embrace, and so on.

So the first problem with characterizing Nietzsche as offering a hermeneutics of suspicion is that this is easily misconstrued as the claim that conscious interpretations should be discounted or ignored. On the contrary, they have immense importance.

Second, the claim can suggest that Nietzsche is interested in uncovering just any causal forces that are operative. But what he's especially interested in is the way in which normatively characterized phenomenon – moralities, social practices, customs, ideals – are misinterpreted by their bearers.[12] I'll explain this below.

NIETZSCHE'S INTERPRETIVE STANCE

I've suggested that the characterization of Nietzsche as offering a hermeneutics of suspicion, while accurate if interpreted in certain ways, is liable to lead to misunderstandings. In this section, I'll review some general features of Nietzsche's interpretive stance. Along the way, I'll note that many of these features are shared by other members of the hermeneutical tradition.

Rejection of Pre-Interpreted Phenomena

First, Nietzsche denies that there are any non-interpreted givens from which we can construct presuppositionless philosophical or scientific accounts. He claims that there are no "immediate certainties" and mocks the idea that knowledge can get "hold of its object purely and nakedly" (BGE 16). Even our most basic relationship to the world, via sense-perception, is mediated by value judgments:

> There is no doubt that all sense perceptions are wholly
> permeated with *value-judgments*… [*gänzlich durchsetzt sind mit*
> *Werthurtheilen…*]. (KSA 12: 2[95])[13]

He suggests that the world presents itself as alluring and aversive, as useful and resistant, as threatening and charming. It incorporates evaluative characteristics as a result of the way in which it relates to our activities and interests. We cannot, he suggests, get past this to some perspective-free way of accessing the world.

And what's true of the world in general is true of the self in particular:

> There are still harmless self-observers who believe that there
> are "immediate certainties"; for example, "I think," or as

the superstition of Schopenhauer put it, "I will"; as though
knowledge here got hold of its object purely and nakedly as "the
thing in itself" without any falsification on the part of either
the subject or the object. But that "immediate certainty," as
well as "absolute knowledge" and the "thing in itself," involve
a *contradictio in adjecto*. I shall repeat a hundred times; we
really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!
Let the people suppose that knowledge means knowing things
entirely; the philosopher must say to himself: When I analyze
the process that is expressed in the sentence, "I think," I find
a whole series of daring assertions that would be difficult,
perhaps impossible, to prove; for example, that it is I who think,
that there must necessarily be something that thinks, that
thinking is an activity and operation on the part of a being who
is thought of as a cause, that there is an "ego," and, finally, that
it is already determined what is to be designated by thinking –
that I know what thinking is […] In place of the "immediate
certainty" in which the people may believe in the case at hand,
the philosopher thus finds a series of metaphysical questions
presented to him, truly searching questions of the intellect; to
wit: "From where do I get the concept of thing? Why do I believe
in cause and effect? What gives me the right to speak of an
ego, and even of an ego as cause, and finally ego as the cause of
thought?" (BGE 16)

What presents itself as immediate is, in fact, mediated by concep-
tual distinctions, metaphysical assumptions, and so on. Thus, after
reviewing various examples of purportedly given phenomena, such as
experiences of the *will* or the *I*, Nietzsche claims that

individual philosophical concepts are not anything capricious
or autonomously evolving, but grow up in connection and
relationship with each other; that, however suddenly and
arbitrarily they seem to appear in the history of thought, they
nevertheless belong just as much to a system as all the members
of the fauna of a continent. (BGE 20)

In these passages, Nietzsche argues that apparently given phenomena – sensory experiences and perceptions of the fact that I am thinking, for example – have a host of presuppositions about the nature of agency, thinking, subjectivity, causality, and thinghood. Were my concept of agency different, Nietzsche emphasizes, I would not perceive my own thinking in the same way. If this is right, then my current conceptual repertoire influences even the most basic perceptions.

The examples above focus on perceptual concepts and philosophical concepts, but for Nietzsche this is a fully general point. Changes in conceptual repertoires lead to changes in purportedly immediate experiences, thereby revealing these experiences not to be immediate at all.

Holism

As the passage from BGE 20 suggests, Nietzsche's rejection of immediate certainties is built upon a form of holism. In fact, he embraces at least two forms of *holism*. He is a holist about *meaning*; and he is a methodological holist about physical and social phenomena.

With regard to meaning, Nietzsche holds that the meanings of concepts are interdependent. Although the above passages focus on specifically philosophical concepts, Nietzsche elsewhere generalizes the point. As he puts it in his notebooks, "An isolated judgment is never 'true,' never knowledge; only in connection and relation of many judgments is there any surety" (KSA 12[7]:4).

Moreover, his approach to studying physical and social phenomena is holistic: as I'll discuss in the following sections, he believes that these phenomena can be grasped and understood only in their historical and social contexts.

Perspectivism

The holism leads into a related topic: perspectivism. I've elsewhere argued that Nietzsche's perspectivism is best understood as a development of Kant's view.[14] According to Kant, the way in

which we cognize the world depends upon the pure concepts of the understanding, or categories, which are specifications of our most fundamental concepts and the relations among them. Kant argues that these concepts and relations are uniform for all rational agents (*Critique of Pure Reason* A80/B106 ff.). Nietzsche accepts the Kantian claim that concepts structure experience. However, he rejects the view that there is one set of concepts and conceptual relations that we necessarily impose upon our experience. Instead, he argues that there are many different, mutually incompatible systems of concepts. We have no way of assessing these systems from an external, neutral vantage point in order to determine which is best. Thus, he claims that the "perspective," or set of relatively fundamental concepts and conceptual relations, differs across historical time; these perspectives include classificatory and evaluative concepts; and, while some perspectives can be shown to be internally inconsistent, to occlude phenomena that other perspectives reveal, and so on, none can be shown to be best.[15]

Nonetheless, we take these perspectives to present us with immediate, unbiased presentations of objects. We fail to see the way in which the perspectives are local and contingent. For the perspectives are ensconced even in our language:

> The word and the concept are the most manifest ground for our belief in this isolation of groups of actions: we do not only *designate* things with them, we think originally that through them we grasp the *true* in things. Through words and concepts we are still continually misled into imagining things as being simpler than they are, separate from one another, indivisible, each existing in and for itself. A philosophical mythology lies concealed in *language* which breaks out again every moment, however careful one may be otherwise.[16]

Our language, our concepts, our distinctions are taken to map onto the structure of the world; whereas, in fact, Nietzsche thinks the world as we experience it is partially constituted by these concepts themselves.

Given that our experiences are partially constituted by these perspectives, Nietzsche believes that understanding physical and social phenomena requires attention to the perspective of which they are a part. This is perhaps where he comes closest to the traditional debates within hermeneutics. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, there was sustained debate about whether the human sciences required different methodological approaches than the natural sciences. Some of the philosophers most closely associated with the hermeneutical tradition, including Dilthey, advocated a distinct, hermeneutical approach to the human sciences. Put simply, these thinkers argued that the human sciences were distinctive in that they concerned meanings that would be lost or occluded by a natural scientific approach. Nietzsche is not directly engaged with this debate. He sees the natural sciences as continuous with the human sciences. But this is not for the familiar reason – it is not because the human sciences need not concern themselves with meanings. Rather, it is because he sees the natural sciences, too, as concerned with meanings. So, while thinkers like Helmholtz argue that human sciences deal with value whereas natural sciences deal only with "dead, indifferent matter," Nietzsche sees the natural sciences as tacitly concerned with value as well: not in the sense that values are the explicit object of concern, but in the sense that the allegedly value-free distinctions and concepts with which (say) the physicist operates presuppose and reinforce evaluative views.[17] Thus, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that

It is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics, too, is only a world-interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit *us*, if I may say so!) and *not* a world-explanation. (BGE 14)

He continues:

"Nature's conformity to law," of which you physicists talk so proudly, as though – why, it exists only owing to your interpretation and bad "philology." It is no matter of fact, no

"text," but rather just a naively humanitarian adjustment
and perversion of meaning, with which you make abundant
concessions to the democratic instincts of the modern soul!
"Everywhere equality before the law – Nature is not different in
that respect, nor better than we": a fine instance of secret motive,
in which the vulgar antagonism to everything privileged and
autocratic – likewise a second and more refined atheism – is once
more disguised. (BGE 22)

Analogously, in the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche criticizes the "faith
with which so many materialistic natural scientists rest content
nowadays, the faith in a world that is supposed to have its equiva-
lent and its measure in human thought and human valuations …
That the only rightful interpretation of the world should be … one
that permits counting, calculating, weighing, seeing, grasping, and
nothing else" (GS 373).

Regardless of whether Nietzsche's claims about physics are
defensible, they do illustrate his general point: there is no set of
concepts or distinctions that is wholly free of evaluative implications
and assumptions.

Concepts and Language

Nietzsche extends these reflections on concepts and language to an
analysis of conscious thought. He maintains that conscious thought
is itself dependent on concepts:

Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing
it [*denkt immerfort, aber weiss es nicht*]; the thinking that rises
to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this – the most
superficial and worst part – for only this conscious thinking
occurs in words, which is to say signs of communication [*denn
allein dieses bewußte Denken* geschieht in Worten, das heisst
in Mittheilungszeichen], and this fact uncovers the origin of
consciousness. In brief, the development of language and the

> development of consciousness (*not* of Reason but merely of the
> way Reason enters consciousness) go hand in hand. (GS 354)

Here, Nietzsche claims that conscious thinking is linguistically articulated. Elsewhere, I have argued that he means, by this, that conscious thinking is conceptually articulated.[18] But, for the reasons discussed in the previous section, the meanings of concepts are not transparent to agents. We fail to recognize the way in which our thoughts are channeled by linguistic structures and concepts. Accordingly, Nietzsche takes conscious (that is, linguistic/conceptual) experience to falsify and distort non-conscious thought. Different conceptual schemes would reveal different aspects of non-conscious thought; none would present it as it is pre-conceptually. Thus, "the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world generalized and made common [*eine Oberflächen- und Zeichenwelt, eine verallgemeinerte, eine vergemeinerte Welt*]" (GS 354). Consciousness is a "simplifying apparatus" (KSA 11: 34[46]), which "involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization" (GS 354).

NIETZSCHE'S METHODOLOGY

Genealogical Investigation of Perspectives

The picture that emerges from Nietzsche's writings is one in which we must give up the idea that there are any simply *given* phenomena: concepts, propositions, and indeed even our experiences have meaning only in relation to the perspectives of which they are a part. How, then, are these phenomena to be understood? Nietzsche's answer is well-known: we must engage in genealogy.

Nietzsche attributes the general point to Hegel. He says that Hegel is one of only three Germans who made substantial philosophical contributions.[19] Specifically, he notes "Hegel's astonishing move, with which he struck through all logical habits and indulgences when he dared to teach that species concepts develop *out of each other*" (GS 357). In other words, Hegel saw that concepts are not fixed

and immutable, but are things with histories; he saw that grasping the meaning of a concept required situating it in its own conceptual scheme.

But there is a crucial difference between Nietzsche and Hegel. Hegel has a vindicatory story according to which, in broad outlines, inadequate conceptual schemes are sublated by progressively more adequate ones. Although there are controversies about how to read the transitions between conceptual schemes that Hegel discusses in the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere, one reading is that the progression is rational: the felt inadequacy of a given conceptual scheme motivates the introduction of a new conceptual scheme, which resolves the tensions or contradictions in the former scheme. Whether this is the best way of reading Hegel does not matter; what does matter is that Nietzsche rejects it. For Nietzsche sees shifts between conceptual schemes as mostly arational. We should not expect rational progressions in conceptual transitions: we should not expect supplanting perspectives to resolve tensions in the supplanted perspectives. In the *Genealogy*, for example, Nietzsche investigates the transition between an ancient warrior morality and Judeo-Christian morality. Rather than tracing the transition to conceptual inadequacies in the former, he believes a host of social and psychological factors ranging from the desire for political power, the desire for vindicatory self-conceptions, and fantasies of revenge on an oppressive ruling class to self-deception about the nature of agency explain the transition. These factors are highly contingent and likely unrepeatable: there is no expectation that societies with similar structures would undergo analogous transformations. In that sense, the explanation is quite local. Moreover, the supplanting moral scheme does not resolve tensions within the former scheme; on the contrary, Nietzsche is at pains to present the later moral scheme as even more conflict-ridden, distorting, and inadequate than the former.

Genealogy thus reveals that transitions between conceptual schemes and the persistence of these schemes are explained

by arational social and psychological processes. But genealogy also helps us to grasp the phenomena in which we are interested. Take morality: absent genealogy, we might erroneously assume that morality is a unified phenomenon, with parts that cohere, with a unified goal, a unified meaning. Nietzsche instead presents it as an amalgam of disparate parts, welded together only by historical accident. Nietzsche makes the same point about social phenomena in general: he thinks that understanding any particular social phenomenon (punishment, judgments of responsibility, moral codes, political ideals, etc.) requires situating that phenomenon in its historical context. Consider his famous remarks on punishment: he writes that while the "custom," "act," and "drama" of punishment is relatively constant across societies, "the meaning, the purposes, the expectation associated with the performance of such procedures" is "fluid" (GM II: 13). The mechanisms of punishment (constraint, infliction of suffering, etc.) are relatively constant; but the meaning is not. For

> the concept "punishment" possesses in fact not one meaning but a whole synthesis of "meanings": the previous history of punishment in general, the history of its employment for the most various purposes, finally crystallizes into a kind of unity that is hard to disentangle, hard to analyze and, as must be emphasized especially, totally indefinable. (Today it is impossible to say for certain why people are really punished: all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.) (GM II: 13)

The same point applies to other social practices. When we examine what initially looks like a unified, stable phenomenon, we find discontinuities, amalgamations of loosely related purposes, and the grafting of disconnected practices onto one another. Thus, Nietzsche writes that one of the dangerous errors of philosophers is

> their lack of an historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticism. They think that they show their

respect for a thing when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* – when they turn it into a mummy. All that philosophers have handled for thousands of years have been concept-mummies; nothing real escaped their grasp alive. Whenever these venerable concept-idolaters revere something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship. (TI III: 1)[20]

This is one reason why a genealogical approach is needed. Genealogy traces the contingent historical connections between phenomena, showing how they emerged, were transformed, and persisted.

Assessing Perspectives

Assume that we conduct a detailed historical and genealogical investigation of a perspective, getting it clearly into view. What next? Nietzsche suggests that the articulation of the perspective sometimes enables us to critique it. In fact, he presents this as his real aim: "my real concern was something much more important than hypothesis-mongering, either my own or other people's, on the origin of morality … what was at stake was the *value* of morality" (GM Preface 5). So genealogy somehow enables critique. But how, exactly?

Although there are different interpretive options, I think the most defensible reading is a roughly Hegelian one: Nietzsche appeals solely to *immanent critique*. On this interpretation, we have to show that a perspective is defective in terms of standards that the inhabitants of the perspective would themselves accept. Perspective A is better than perspective B if you can show an inhabitant of perspective B that she has reason to switch to perspective A.

This criterion is often interpreted solely in epistemic terms. On this reading, the transition from B to A involves some kind of epistemic gain: it resolves a contradiction to which B succumbs, or explains a phenomenon that B occludes, or resolves a tension within B, and so on. So, for example, *The Genealogy* argues that Judeo-Christian morality has inconsistent values, incoherent conceptions of agency and responsibility, and so on. We can recognize this from

within the Judeo-Christian perspective; and we can thus see that we have reason to modify or abandon it.

But what about situations in which we're faced with two incommensurable perspectives, each with its own flaws, with neither one resolving the tensions within the other? This is, more or less, the scenario Nietzsche presents us with in the *Genealogy*. True, Judeo-Christian morality is presented as leading to pathology, self-deception, and a hindrance of human flourishing; but the archaic warrior morality looks oppressive, superficial, and damning for the bulk of humanity. Epistemic criteria won't provide good grounds for shifting from one to the other; both contain internal tensions and contradictions.

Crucially, Nietzsche also appeals to evaluative criteria in assessing perspectives. Roughly, he tries to show that certain perspectives should be rejected because they undermine or conflict with "will to power." He often expresses this point by claiming that a given perspective is counter to *life* or *health*; but those notions are defined in terms of will to power. Thus, he writes that modern morality is "hostile to life" and "negates life,"[21] that it undermines "the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man" (GM Preface 6), and so on. How should these remarks be taken? As I interpret him, Nietzsche argues for a conception of agency according to which each action aims at power; given this, moral interpretations which occlude this connection, or which lead us astray from our aims, are to be rejected. Thus, these critiques in terms of power are still immanent critique, because the standard of will to power is (purportedly) present in every perspective.[22]

So we can critique perspectives on immanent grounds, and these grounds can be both epistemic and evaluative. This will enable us to show that certain perspectives are preferable to others. However, Nietzsche does not think that this will give us a unique final perspective. He thinks there will be different, mutually incompatible perspectives that are equally well justified. Or, put differently: there are better and worse perspectives, but we have no reason

to believe that there is any *best* perspective. Notice, too, that this critique is always historically situated. We do not generate and assess perspectives *ex nihilo*. We start with our own perspective, and move on (or not) from there.

Does Nietzsche Have a Specific Hermeneutical Theory?

Given all of this, Nietzsche rejects the idea that there are unitary, neatly distinguishable natural, social, and evaluative phenomena: what looks unified from one perspective will not from another. But does Nietzsche advocate any specific method for studying these phenomena? Does he, as Ricœur and others suggest, endorse some explicit hermeneutical strategy?

As I read him, he doesn't. Nietzsche rejects ahistorical approaches to these phenomena. Aside from that, though, he does not offer any specific set of procedures that one must follow. He is always open to revision: he treats his own hypotheses as provisional. Thus, after offering a genealogy of the transition from Homeric morality to Judeo-Christian morality, he appends a note suggesting that someone organize a "series of academic prize essays" on the history of morality, open to philologists, historians, professional philosophers, doctors, and physiologists (GM I:17). The suggestion seems to be that these studies could supplant his own.

We can make a few additional generalizations, though. For one thing, Nietzsche is interested in normatively characterized phenomena. Although this is probably obvious to most readers, Nietzsche is concerned with practices in which agents adopt norms, principles, values; in which they adopt normatively laden concepts such as obedience and guilt; and in which their own perspectives on these phenomena make a difference in determining what these phenomena are.

Additionally, Nietzsche does not suggest that interpretation of these phenomena requires identifying some *best* interpretation and showing that and why it is superior to erroneous interpretations. Rather, he tries to offer *better* explanations. He tries to show that

interpretation A is better than interpretation B in that A reveals things that B conceals, or accounts for factors that B overlooks, or makes sense of contradictions and tensions in B, or reveals otherwise hidden connections, or makes better sense of the agents' motivations, etc. So, the person who understands some area, who has knowledge of it, is best understood as the person who has a systematic understanding of a series of related facts, who sees how these facts connect; often the connections will not be logical entailments, and often seeing the connections will require both historical sensitivity and interpretive skill.

INTERPRETING HISTORY, INTERPRETING MODERNITY

With these remarks on interpretation, language, and thought at hand, we can examine one of the most familiar features of Nietzsche's philosophy: his claims about the death of God and impending nihilism.

Nietzsche treats human beings as fundamentally driven by a desire for interpretations of their experience that render experience meaningful. Consider Nietzsche's first book, the *Birth of Tragedy*.[23] There, he writes that "the Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence" (BT 3); in particular, the Greek recognized that "despite all its beauty and moderation, his entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering" (BT 4). The Olympian gods were designed to address this need: "that he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians" (BT 3). The Olympian gods were intended for "seducing one to a continuation of life" (BT 3).

Analogous points are made in the *Gay Science*. In a section entitled "The teachers of the purpose of existence," Nietzsche writes:

> At present, we still live in the age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions. What is the meaning of the ever-new appearance of these founders of moralities and religions, of these instigators of fights about moral valuations, these teachers of pangs of conscience and religious wars? … It is obvious that these

tragedies, too, work in the interest of the *species,* even if they should believe that they are working in the interest of God, as God's emissaries. They, too, promote the life of the species *by promoting the faith in life.* "Life is worth living," each of them shouts, "there is something to life, there is something behind life, beneath it; beware!" … Life *ought to* be loved *because* – ! … The ethical teacher makes his appearance as the teacher of the purpose of existence in order that what happens necessarily and always, by itself and without a purpose, shall henceforth seem to be done for a purpose and strike man as reason and an ultimate commandment. (GS 1)

Here, Nietzsche claims that the essential feature of religions and moralities is that they provide an explanation or meaning for otherwise meaningless events. In its most general form, this is the belief that life has some meaning or purpose. In more particular contexts, it is the belief that certain actions or pursuits are worthy and others worthless.

Analogously, at the end of the *Genealogy*, he writes:

[Man] did not know how to justify, explain, affirm himself: *he suffered from the problem of his meaning.* He suffered otherwise as well, he was for the most part a diseased animal; but the suffering itself was not his problem, rather that the answer was missing to the scream of his question: "*to what end* suffering?" Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* negate suffering, he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a meaning for it, a to-this-end of suffering. *The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse thus far stretched over humanity*. (GM III: 28)

In these passages, Nietzsche again emphasizes the profound desire that we have to interpret our existence in a way that renders it meaningful. He claims that particular moral systems, from the morality of the ancient Greeks, to that of the early Christians, to that of modernity, are responsive to this need.

He worries, though, that we are on the cusp of a crisis. The systems that formerly answered this need are becoming unsustainable. Briefly, his point is that we have come to value truth for its own sake, as opposed to merely for the sake of other ends; when this commitment to truth becomes sufficiently strong, Nietzsche claims that it will undermine the purported grounds for our traditional values (see GM III). He tells us that "the whole of our European morality" is on the verge of "collapse" (GS 343), for "the deeper one looks, the more our valuations disappear – *meaninglessness approaches!*" (KSA 11:25[505]). For truthful inquiry reveals that these moral systems have been supported on extraordinarily thin grounds.

Suppose this is right. Nietzsche worries that with the collapse of ideals, we will enter a phase of nihilism. Although Nietzsche discusses several different types of nihilism, the one that is relevant here is anomie: social pressures, convention, emotional attachments, and so forth may keep us attached to certain values for a time, but these values lack any coherent justification. As a result, our commitments are at risk of becoming attenuated: we may cease to treat these values as overriding and authoritative. We see them as optional, as capable of being abandoned. Custom, habit, and inertia might preserve vestigial forms of these values, but the sense of their importance, the sense that they override competing pressures, will dissipate.

When this occurs, the desire for interpretations that render existence meaningful or affirmable goes unmet. Thus, Nietzsche endeavors to give some new interpretations: he considers efforts to curtail or circumscribe the will to truth, efforts to enact an aesthetic justification of existence, efforts to affirm the eternal recurrence of one's life, and struggles to inaugurate new ideals (GS Preface 4, GS 107, BGE 59, GM III). I lack the space to explore the details here, but the common thread is readily apparent: Nietzsche wants to find a way of preserving these meaning-conferring interpretations in historical and social circumstances that render them dubious.

NIETZSCHE'S INFLUENCE

In closing, a very brief word on the powerful and pervasive influence of Nietzsche's thought. Georg Simmel describes Nietzsche as the Copernicus of philosophical ethics, effecting a transformation in philosophy as profound as that of Copernicus in astronomy.[24] The list of thinkers influenced by him encompasses nearly all of the notable German and French philosophers of the twentieth century, including many who play active roles in the hermeneutical tradition: Adorno, Camus, Deleuze, Foucault, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Jaspers, Sartre, Scheler, Weber, and the list could go on. Many of these thinkers are covered by other chapters in this volume, so let me close by mentioning just one: Michel Foucault, who is especially close to Nietzsche.

Foucault's methodological approach is in many respects Nietzschean: like Nietzsche, Foucault devotes many of his works to revealing the historically contingent and fluid nature of concepts, social institutions, and values that have traditionally been taken as necessary and fixed. Like Nietzsche, Foucault tries to reveal the way in which purportedly universal truths about human beings and human nature are, when examined carefully, contingent expressions of the evaluative beliefs of particular cultures. Like Nietzsche, Foucault's critical analyses of present conditions often reveal the way in which these present conditions are damaging or oppressive. And, like Nietzsche, Foucault believes that these damaging effects often require careful study: they are not obvious at first glance; uncovering them requires attentive, prolonged investigation of social institutions and practices.

But there are differences. One that stands out right away, when comparing the two thinkers, is the level of historical detail and erudition in Foucault's studies. Nietzsche's historical texts – *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Genealogy*, *The Antichrist* – are brilliant but, with a few exceptions, are largely unmoored from concrete, detailed historical evidence. The evidence may be there in the background – Foucault

may be right that genealogy "depends on a vast accumulation of source material" – but, if Nietzsche has this evidence, he certainly doesn't present it.[25] So, whereas Nietzsche spends a few pages on the changing forms and meanings of punishment (*Genealogy of Morals* II), Foucault provides over three hundred pages, replete with detailed evidence, on the emergence of the modern penal system.[26]

In addition, Foucault's distinction between archaeology and genealogy involves something of a departure from Nietzsche. In most of his texts, Foucault advocates an "archaeological" approach.[27] He maintains that philosophical and scientific systems, as well as knowledge claims in general, are governed by principles that operate non-consciously. Thus, studying what individuals consciously think will give us only part of the picture; we also need to examine the unconscious structures within which these conscious thoughts arise. Archaeology attempts to uncover these structures, revealing the way in which they constrain thought within particular perspectives (or "epistemes," as Foucault calls them). Whereas archaeology reveals these principles, in late works Foucault presents genealogy as playing a more critical role: it shows the *effects* of these contingent principles on the present, and thereby seeks to undermine or destabilize them.[28]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has outlined the ways in which Nietzsche's concerns intersect with those of the hermeneutical tradition. I began by arguing that while characterizing Nietzsche as offering a hermeneutics of suspicion is not wrong, it is easily misinterpreted. More concretely, I have argued that Nietzsche's interpretive stance has several key features: he rejects immediate givens, endorses holism and perspectivism, and sees conscious experience as structured by concepts and language. Methodologically, Nietzsche inaugurates a genealogical approach to studying objects of philosophical concern, and offers a series of thoughts and arguments on perspectives and the ways in which they might be assessed. I reviewed the way in which he takes religious, moral, and philosophical systems as

aspiring to provide an interpretation of existence that renders it meaningful, while seeing this demand as unmet by modernity. In closing, I offered some brief reflections on Foucault's Nietzschean approach to interpretation.

NOTES

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 1886. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). Hereafter cited as BGE followed by section number.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* 1887. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967). Hereafter cited as GM followed by part and section number.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist* 1895. *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967). Hereafter cited as A followed by section number.

4 Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 33.

5 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

6 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

7 For discussion of these points, see Paul Katsafanas, *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Brian Leiter, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud," in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 74.

9 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe* 1881, Section 195. *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 116.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* 1882/1887. *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974). Hereafter cited as GS followed by section number.

12 True, Nietzsche occasionally gestures at non-normative, physiological explanations of particular actions. But these claims about physiology are most notable for their emptiness: Nietzsche makes no concrete claims about the connection between particular physiological states and particular actions.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967–1977). Hereafter cited as KSA followed by volume, notebook, and entry number.

14 See *The Nietzschean Self*, ch. 3.

15 Nietzsche's talk of perspectives sometimes focuses on these kinds of conceptual changes, and sometimes on affective changes. Thus, he will point out that an individual's "perspective" can shift when the individual begins to experience different affects. As these points are less relevant for our purposes, I here focus solely on the points about concepts.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches 1878*. *Human, All too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Volume II, Part 2, Section 11.

17 Hermann von Helmholtz, "On the Relation of Natural Science to Science in General," in *Science and Culture: Popular and Philosophical Essays*, ed. David Cahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 76–95, at 81.

18 See *The Nietzschean Self*, chs. 2–3.

19 Kant is credited with a second insight, specifically the one mentioned above about concepts structuring experience. The third is Leibniz, whom Nietzsche credits with the discovery of the unconscious.

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung* 1889. *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1968). Hereafter cited as TI followed by part and section number.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* 1895. *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1968).

22 Paul Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 6.

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* 1872. *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1967). Hereafter cited as BT followed by section number.

24 Georg Simmel, *Friedrich Nietzsche – Eine moralphilosophische Silhouette*, in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen, 1894 bis 1900*, ed. H. Dahme and D. Frisby (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 124.

25   Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1984).

26   Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) (*Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon, 1977).

27   Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

28   See, for example, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.