

## Nietzsche's "Interpretation" in the *Genealogy*

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### I. Introduction

In the preface of On the Genealogy of Morality (GM),<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche tells us the third treatise of his book is an "interpretation"<sup>3</sup> of the aphorism placed at the beginning of that treatise. Much work – primarily by John Wilcox, Maudemarie Clark, and Christopher Janaway<sup>4</sup> – has gone into proving that the aphorism is not the quotation from Zarathustra placed at the beginning of the treatise, but that it is Section 1 (perhaps minus the last few lines) of the third treatise. I am in agreement on this point. But it seems the limited work that has been done on explaining in what sense the third treatise is an interpretation of the first aphorism is fundamentally misguided. In particular, we do not have a grasp of what Nietzsche means by 'interpretation'. This ought to strike us as a significant hole in the literature, for it leaves misunderstood the longest of the three treatises that comprise what is widely regarded as Nietzsche's most important and extended analysis of morality.

The goal of this paper is to fill that lacuna by illustrating 1) the inadequacies of a theory of what Nietzsche means to be doing in the third treatise, 2) what the right – that is, Nietzsche's – understanding of 'interpretation' is, 3) how we ought to approach the third treatise, and 4) the particular impacts this approach has on our reading of the third treatise. In the course of proving these theses other influential readings of Nietzsche are challenged, in particular those concerning Nietzsche's conception of the will to power and his perspectivism.

## II. Nietzsche's Use of "Interpretation"

A. *Wilcox on interpretation.* Let us begin by reminding ourselves of what Nietzsche says in section 8 of the preface to GM:

An aphorism...has not been 'deciphered' simply because it has been read through; rather its interpretation must now begin, and for this an art of interpretation is needed. In the third treatise of this book I have offered a sample of what I call 'interpretation' in such a case:—an aphorism is placed before this treatise, the treatise itself is a commentary on it. Admittedly, to practice reading as an *art* in this way one thing above all is necessary, something which these days has been unlearned better than anything else – and it will therefore be a while before my writings are 'readable' (7).

What, we may ask, does Nietzsche mean when he says that he "interprets" the aphorism at the beginning of the third treatise? Wilcox<sup>5</sup> offers a proposal: Nietzsche gives us everything he has to say in the first section, or aphorism, and the subsequent sections lay out, or explain in greater detail and depth, what is already contained in the first section. The aphorism, Wilcox claims, is an extremely condensed version, an abstract, of the content of the third treatise (minus the first section, of course): "Start with a Nietzschean aphorism; compose an essay that could have been Nietzsche's, and which he then could have condensed to produce that aphorism; then *that essay is the kind of exegesis he wanted his readers to be able to produce.*"<sup>6</sup>

But there are three reasons to find Wilcox's understanding of Nietzsche's use of 'interpretation' misguided, each of which is grounded in remarks Nietzsche offers in the above passage.

The first criticism consists in asking why, if the third treatise is simply a laying out, an explication in greater detail, of what is in the first aphorism, does Nietzsche think he is using the term 'interpretation' in a way idiosyncratic to him ("what I call 'interpretation'")? Nietzsche is not using 'interpretation' in a new or interesting sense if this is all he means, for long before Nietzsche started writing, philosophers, philologists, and a host of other types of scholars knew they had to, and knew how to, interpret a text in this sense. Expanding on some ideas, explaining with more clarity, and going slower to explain each point carefully, are just what scholars have done for centuries. There is no reason to think Nietzsche would think he is doing anything new, no need for him to use 'interpretation' in an idiosyncratic sense, if all he is doing in the third treatise is what has been done for so long already; he was not ignorant of these practices.

The second criticism asks, in what way does laying out what is already contained in the first section constitute an "*art* of interpretation?" Further, why is a special kind of *art* of reading necessary if all that is done is explicating what is already there (though hard to see given just how condensed the essay is in the first aphorism)? Granted, to see that the essay lays out the first aphorism in greater detail requires some scholarly skills – ones Wilcox exercised well – but still, the term 'art' is a curious one, and we should seriously consider it before dismissing it as mere rhetorical flair. I come back to why Nietzsche chose this term at the end of explaining what I think Nietzsche means by 'interpretation.' At any rate, Wilcox's

understanding of ‘interpretation’ does not help us at all in understanding what Nietzsche could have meant.

The third and last criticism consists in asking, why will it be “a while before [Nietzsche’s] writings are ‘readable?’” One possible answer is that Nietzsche thinks it will take a while because people will first have to figure out whether the aphorism being interpreted is the quotation from Zarathustra, or if it is the first section. But this is highly unlikely; we have no reason to think Nietzsche meant to deceive us when he affixed the Zarathustra quotation. In fact, once presented with the analyses of Wilcox, Clark, and Janaway, it is relatively easy to see that the aphorism really is section one, as evidenced by the number of philosophers Wilcox reports as having conceded they were wrong about what they took the aphorism to be.<sup>7</sup> Further, there is no reason to think that discovering that the first section is the aphorism being interpreted was discovered because we are living in different times than the one in which Nietzsche found himself – a time and atmosphere with habits conducive to the discovery; the arguments presented by Wilcox, Clark, and Janaway could just as easily have come during Nietzsche’s life as ours.

Wilcox is not completely wrong, though; there is certainly some laying out, some further explication, of the first section in the rest of the third treatise; it would be foolish to deny this. For clearly Nietzsche talks about the relevant characters throughout his treatise, devoting a number of sections to each type of person (artist, philosopher, etc.), and he also goes into greater depth (how could he not given the shortness of the aphorism and the length of the treatise?). But adding additional details *is not what constitutes the interpretation* of the aphorism. If we are to understand what the interpretation does consist in, we must first understand what Nietzsche means by ‘interpretation’.

**B. Interpretation as falsification.** We begin with Beyond Good & Evil (BGE), section 22, of which the following is an excerpt:

You must forgive an old philologist like me who cannot help maliciously putting his finger on bad tricks of interpretation: but this ‘conformity of nature to law,’ which you physicists are so proud of...exists only because of your interpretation and bad ‘philology.’ It is not a matter of fact, not a ‘text,’ but instead only a naïve humanitarian correction and a distortion of meaning that you use in order to comfortably accommodate the democratic instincts of the modern soul! ‘Everywhere, equality before the law, - in this respect, nature is no different and not better off than we are’: a lovely case of ulterior motivation...But, as I have said, this is interpretation, not text; and somebody with an opposite mode of interpretation could come along and be able to read from the same nature, and with reference to the same set of appearances, a tyrannically ruthless and pitiless execution of power claims...Granted, this is only an interpretation too – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well then, so much the better (22-3).<sup>8</sup>

There are several lessons to learn from this passage.

First, it demonstrates a contrast between “interpretation,” on the one hand, and “matter of fact” and “text,” on the other. “Interpretation” is “a distortion of meaning”; interpretations are *false*. Nietzsche could not be more explicit on this point

than in GM III:24: “all interpretation (of doing violence, pressing into orderly form, abridging, omitting, padding, fabricating, falsifying and whatever else belongs to the *essence* of all interpreting)” (109). Thus, when physicists tell us that nature works according to laws, which Nietzsche claims is an interpretation of the text that is nature, they are, according to Nietzsche, claiming something false. And, when Nietzsche tells us nature works as a set of “pitiless execution of power claims,” he too is saying something false.

Second, the false claims are claims about what *explains* why (some aspect of) the world is the way it is; they are explanations of how nature works. And these explanations are false because (according to Nietzsche) the explanations reference non-existent entities; the physicists refer to non-existent laws of nature, and Nietzsche refers to non-existent power claims; these things are not part of the text.

Third, the particular entities posited are a function of the (evaluative) commitments of the one positing. The physicist committed to democratic ideals according to which everyone is equal under the law is motivated to see conformity to law everywhere, including in nature. But, if one is committed to a different (evaluative) perspective (for example, one in which power is taken to be of great importance) then one might posit a different entity (*e.g.* pitiless power claims). Both positors claim something false; objects of differing masses fall at the same rate, but that is neither because the objects are obeying laws nor because some entity (gravity?) commands them to do so. In summary, as Nietzsche presents it in this passage, interpretation involves a) positing entities that do not exist and b) referring to these entities in explanations about why (some aspect of) the world is the way it is. Further, the particular entity posited varies according to the (evaluative) commitments of the one positing. Offerings of interpretations are offerings of false pictures of the world.

This notion of interpretation is found throughout GM. In III:16, Nietzsche writes

That ‘sinfulness’ in humans is not a factual state but rather only the *interpretation* of a factual state, namely of being physiologically out of sorts – the latter seen from a moral-religious perspective that is no longer binding on us... ‘[P]ain of the soul’ itself does not at all count as a factual state but rather only as an *interpretation* (causal interpretation) of factual states that could not yet be exactly formulated (92-3, my emphases).

There are two points to draw from this passage. First, once again Nietzsche contrasts a “factual state” with something that is “only an interpretation.” Second, in this passage the ascetic priest has interpreted sickness, “being physiologically out of sorts,” as sinfulness, as guilt before God. It is a “causal interpretation” because the sickness is seen as the result of a particular cause, namely, that of having sinned. But there is no such thing as “sin”, for sinning is a breach of a commandment given by a being that does not exist. The priest, then, posits a state that does not exist, which is itself the result of occupying the moral-religious perspective, and appeals to it in a causal explanation. This use of “interpretation” is identical to its use in BGE 22.<sup>9</sup>

*C. The arts of interpretation and reading.* The two passages above amply illustrate what Nietzsche means by “interpretation,” as do the numerous passages noted in endnote viii. But recall that in the preface of GM Nietzsche claims that in order to interpret the aphorism at the beginning of the third treatise the “arts” of

interpretation and reading are needed. Interpretation consists in proffering false explanations; how is one to offer such explanations in a way that constitutes an art?

In The Gay Science, section 299, *What one should learn from artists*, Nietzsche asks

How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?...Here we could learn something from...artists who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or to place them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspectives; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of sunset; or giving them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent.<sup>10</sup>

What we need to learn from the artist is how to distort and falsify objects in order to make them appear more beautiful, attractive, and desirable. And, as we have seen, interpretation essentially involves falsification. The art of interpretation, then, is to falsify facts in such a way that the world appears inviting and beautiful. The physicists with democratic ideals engage in this art of interpretation when they posit laws of nature; they are comforted by the thought that, “Everywhere, equality before the law, - in this respect, nature is no different and no better off than we are” (BGE 22). Nietzsche finds the world more inviting when seen as the “pitiless execution of power claims.”

But if the art of interpretation consists in offering false but beautiful interpretations of various phenomena, what does the art of reading consist in? Here Nietzsche is rather explicit about what he means by “the art of reading,” though we find his comments not in GM but rather in The Anti-Christ. In section 52 of that book he discusses the Christians’ need to lie and the inability to tell the truth.

Another sign of the theologian is his *incapacity for philology*. What is here meant by philology is, in a very broad sense, the art of reading well—of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand. Philology as *ephexis* [checking, stopping, suspension of judgment] in interpretation...The manner in which a theologian, in Berlin as in Rome, interprets a verse of Scripture or an event—for example, a victory of the armies of the fatherland, in the higher light of the Psalms of David—is always so audacious that a philologist can only tear his hair.<sup>11</sup>

“The art of reading well” is presented here as an expression of “the desire to understand,” to read facts without “falsifying them by interpretation.” The theologian, Nietzsche claims, is incapable of engaging in the art of reading well; he has an “*incapacity for philology*” and “is false because he is sick.” Later, in section 59 of the same book, Nietzsche claims that not only do the priests fail to practice the art of reading well, but that they also overthrew a regime that did practice it. In particular, the ancient Greeks and Romans, before the slave revolt in morality began, were such practitioners of the art of reading well.

The whole labor of the ancient word *in vain*: I have no word to express my feelings about something so tremendous...Wherefore Greeks? Wherefore Romans?

All the presuppositions for a scholarly culture, all scientific *methods*, were already there; the great, the incomparable art of reading well had already been established—that presupposition for the tradition of culture, for the unity of science; natural science, allied with mathematics and mechanics, was well along on the best way—the *sense for facts*, the last and most valuable of all the senses.<sup>12</sup>

Here Nietzsche reiterates his conception of the “art of reading well”: it is a “sense for facts.” That art is lost when “[h]idden vengefulness, petty envy become master,” that is, when noble morality is replaced by slave morality, when the priests, the theologians, the “cunning, stealthy, invisible, anemic vampires....drained” the Greeks and Romans.<sup>13</sup> This discussion of the loss of the practice of the art of reading well sheds light on a remark Nietzsche makes in section 8 of the preface to GM. There he said that, in order for one to read the third treatise one must practice the art of reading, “something which these days has been unlearned better than anything else.” The passages in The Anti-Christ demonstrate how they were “unlearned”: the Christians got the better of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The first task of this paper, as stated in the introduction, is to show that one conception of what Nietzsche means by ‘interpretation’ is misguided; I have argued that Wilcox’s position is misguided. The second task is to elucidate an accurate account of what Nietzsche means by ‘interpretation’; I have argued, first, that

interpretations are profferings of false causal explanations, second, that the art of interpretation consists in interpreting in such a way that the false explanations offered make the text or event appear more beautiful or inviting, and third, that the art of reading consists in having the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, to read without falsifying the facts. We now proceed to the third task: demonstrating how this understanding of Nietzsche's use of 'interpretation', along with what he says in section 8 of the preface to GM, ought to impact our approach, or method, to reading the third treatise of GM.

**D. *Approaching the third treatise.*** In light of the above discussion, we may formulate an argument on how we ought to approach the third treatise.

1. The third treatise is an interpretation of the aphorism placed at the beginning of the third treatise (as Nietzsche tells us in the preface of GM).
2. The aphorism placed at the beginning of the third treatise is section one of that treatise (as illustrated by Wilcox, Clark, and Janaway).
3. Interpreting a set of facts, or text or event, consists in falsifying the facts (as illustrated in II.B, above).
4. Therefore, the third treatise falsifies the facts contained in section one of the third treatise.
  - More specifically, Nietzsche will falsify the facts in section one by offering false causal explanations of how those facts came to be *via* an appeal to a non-existent entity and, insofar as he is engaged in the art of interpretation, will do it in a way that makes those facts more inviting or beautiful.

We have before us a new approach to reading the third treatise of GM (and have thereby completed our third task): we must regard section one of the third treatise as a set of facts, and we must be on the lookout in subsequent sections for false causal explanations of those facts.

Our fourth and final task is to apply this approach; does the first section of the third treatise really contain a set of facts? Does Nietzsche really falsify those facts in subsequent sections (so as to make them more beautiful)? Perhaps this sounds dubious, but in the remainder of this paper I demonstrate not only that we ought to answer both of these questions in the affirmative, but also that Nietzsche *explicitly tells us throughout the third treatise* that he is doing what I claim he is doing.

I proceed as follows: first, I argue that an analysis of the first section of the third treatise does indeed reveal that it contains a set of facts, specifically facts about the causal role the ascetic ideal has played in the lives of various kinds of people (philosopher, priest, and so on). Second, I turn to BGE to elucidate one particular way in which Nietzsche falsifies a fact, and third, demonstrate that this same way of falsifying a fact is repeated in GM. More specifically, I demonstrate how Nietzsche falsifies facts about two figures mentioned in the first section of the third treatise, the philosopher and the priest.

### **III. The Aphorism as a Set of Facts**

**A. Analysis of the aphorism.** In the first section of the third treatise Nietzsche offers a set of facts that concern the various *causal roles* the ascetic ideal has played in the lives of artists *qua* artists, philosophers *qua* philosophers, etc. The philosophers use the ascetic ideal to attain a higher spirituality, the physiologically failed use it to

appear to themselves to be “‘too good’ for this world” and to combat “slow pain” and “boredom,” etc. Each uses the ascetic ideal as a tool to achieve their respective (conscious or unconscious) goals. Wilcox is right to argue that much of the third treatise is devoted to explaining this in greater detail; Nietzsche does in fact expand upon these ideas, these (alleged) historical realities, about how the ascetic ideal has played an important causal role in the lives of all these people. Note, however, that the offerings of (causal) explanations do not amount to offerings of interpretations, for interpretation requires false explanations via an appeal to non-existent entities. Let us take a closer look at the text to demonstrate that the first section contains facts, not interpretations.

The following statement in the first section sets off warning bells: that the ascetic ideal means “among priests the true priests’ faith, their best tool of power, also the ‘most high’ permission to power” (67). One might suspect that because Nietzsche talks about “power” here he is engaging in the same sort of interpretation he offered in BGE 22, *viz.* claiming to explain some state of affairs by illustrating the way in which “power claims” cause something to come about. But this reading would rely on misreading the text. Though it is true that talk of “power” sets off warning bells indicating that Nietzsche is engaging in interpretation, here it is a false alarm, for, unlike BGE 22, the notion of power is not employed here to explain anything at all; it is what is being explained. More specifically, what is explained is how the priests came to have power, where “having power” just means being in a position to influence how people live their lives and to be admired (and perhaps envied). The explanation is that the priests used the ascetic ideal itself as a tool to achieve that position of leadership, for the ascetic ideal calls for, among other things, obedience to the will of god and, of course, to his representatives. The same applies to the claim

that the ascetic ideal is their “most high” permission to power: the ascetic ideal gives them the resources to convince others that the power they have over them is justified.

Another statement is also easily seen as a matter of fact and not interpretation: that the ascetic ideal is, “among saints, finally, a pretext for hibernation...their rest in nothingness.” Saints, then, have a goal: hibernation, rest. And the ascetic ideal, or more specifically, their embrace of the ascetic ideal, affords them the rest they seek. The “physiologically failed” have a different goal: “to appear to [themselves] to be ‘too good’ for this world.” And the ascetic ideal is “their principal instrument in the battle with slow pain and with boredom.” We need not belabor the point; the same reasoning may be applied to the remainder of the aphorism.

**B. *Responding to objections.*** Perhaps the reader still thinks that section one of the third treatise is a set of interpretations. But that view encounters insurmountable obstacles. If there is interpretation involved in the first section then we have to think that 1) there is some set of facts, some phenomena, being interpreted (that are not mentioned in this section), and 2) that the statements in the aphorism refer to non-existent entities that reflect a particular evaluative perspective. But what are these other facts? What are the non-existent entities to which they refer? And what particular evaluative standpoint is occupied here? If one still disagrees with the claim that the aphorism is a set of facts, but agrees with the analysis of what Nietzsche means by ‘interpretation’, one has to overcome the insurmountable obstacle of answering these questions. Still, though, let us continue to entertain objections.

One possible objection to the view that the first aphorism reports a set of facts is that the types of people discussed – artists, philosophers, priests, saints, the physiologically failed – would not assent to these facts. An artist would not agree the

ascetic ideal means to him “nothing or too many different things,” and philosophers will not admit that to them the ascetic ideal means “something like a nose and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality.” This is not a serious objection. People frequently misunderstand themselves, and Nietzsche was well aware of this: “That someone *feels* ‘guilty,’ ‘sinful,’ does not at all prove he is right in feeling so; just as little as someone is healthy merely because he feels healthy” (GM III:16, 93). He also refers to the “ascetic self-misunderstanding” of philosophers in GM III:10, 82, and tells us, in GM III:11, that it is just these kinds of facts the ascetic priest will be unable to see because he is too invested in the ascetic ideal and the reasons he thinks he has for accepting it. “It is from the outset improbable that so interested a stance toward our problem will be of particular use to it; the ascetic priest will hardly even be the most successful defender of his ideal” (83).

A related possible objection arises here: the ascetic priest cannot admit to these alleged facts because he is too invested in his ideal, and why not think the same of Nietzsche? Nietzsche clearly has particular values, a particular interpretative/evaluative lens through which he wants to view the world, and so perhaps he can no longer divorce himself from it enough to see the facts given in the aphorism.

This objection will not work either. Nietzsche is well aware, in BGE 22, for instance, that he is engaged in interpretation. He gaily proclaims it: “Granted, this is only an interpretation too – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well then, so much the better.” Clearly Nietzsche knows when he is engaged in interpretation.

C. *Transition*. Let us now move on from the objections and ask, what are the particular interpretations of the facts Nietzsche offers throughout the third treatise? Given the elucidation of interpretation offered above, we know that we should be on the lookout for explanations that appeal to non-existent entities. It should be clear, however, that even if one disagrees with the particular claims concerning how Nietzsche interprets the facts (given in the next section), we have before us a new approach to reading and understanding the third treatise, an approach that requires an “art of reading.”

#### IV. The Interpretations of the Facts

A. *Preparatory remarks*. We have already seen one case in which Nietzsche offers an interpretation of a set of facts according to his values: BGE 22, in which we can interpret nature as working not according to laws, but according to claims of power. This serves as a paradigm case of what a Nietzschean interpretation looks like. But another example, again from BGE, is very helpful, for the interpretation offered there is identical to the interpretations offered in the third treatise of GM. We turn to BGE 13, along with Maudemarie Clark’s discussion of that passage.<sup>14</sup> The section is short, and it is here quoted in its entirety:

Physiologists should think twice before positioning the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength – life itself is will to power -: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of this. – In short, here as elsewhere, watch out for *superfluous* teleological principles! – such as the drive for preservation

(which we owe to Spinoza's inconsistency -). This is demanded by method, which must essentially be the economy of principles.

Clark argues that we must understand Nietzsche as being ironic and playful in this passage. On the face of it, it looks as though Nietzsche objects to Spinoza on the ground that Spinoza thinks self-preservation is the result of a drive for self-preservation when really self-preservation is the result of a different drive, namely, the drive to discharge strength. But to think that that is what Nietzsche is doing to fail to heed the very warning that Nietzsche provides in the section: "here as elsewhere, watch out for *superfluous* teleological principles!" The drive for self-preservation is such a teleological principle: all we know of animals is that they behave in certain ways and that they survive, but that does not warrant us in positing an entity called "the drive (or instinct) for self-preservation." But just as positing that drive is restricted by the method of "the economy of principles," so too is Nietzsche's positing of an entity called "the drive to discharge strength." As Clark puts it,

If a living thing just vents its force without seeking to do so, it can be seen as an energy-discharging machine and there is no basis for attributing a will to it, much less a will to power...[But] does Nietzsche have any basis for claiming that organisms seek to discharge their energy other than that their behavior does discharge energy? (123).<sup>15</sup>

The response to this question is, of course, no – Nietzsche’s claim that there is a drive that *seeks* to discharge power is a superfluous teleological principle; there is no such entity.

If Clark is right about this passage, and I believe she is, we see another example of interpretation. The text is the behavior of animals, especially humans, and the behavior is conducive to both self-preservation and discharging or venting energy and power. Spinoza and the “physiologists” focus on the fact that the behavior conduces to self-preservation and they then interpret the fact that the animals survive by positing a drive for self-preservation; but there is no such entity. Thus, they explain the fact of survival by appeal to a non-existent entity; this is paradigmatic interpretation in Nietzsche’s sense. Nietzsche looks at this same phenomenon, the same text, and posits a different entity: a will to discharging energy, a will to power. And the interpretation Nietzsche offers is an expression of his values: he wants to see the world, view the phenomena of the world, through a particular evaluative lens. But just as Spinoza and the physiologists posit a non-existent entity, so too does Nietzsche.<sup>16</sup>

**B. *Interpreting Schopenhauer.*** Let us now take a fact from the first section of the third treatise and see how it is interpreted. The interpretations Nietzsche offers throughout the third treatise are identical to those offered in BGE 13 and 22, and GM III:16.

Nietzsche claims in the first section of the third treatise that the ascetic ideal means “among philosophers and scholars something like a nose and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality,” where by “higher spirituality” Nietzsche means a kind of existence that goes beyond following impulses directed at

the pleasures of sex, luxuries, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche expands on this fact in sections 6-8 of the third treatise. There, he claims that Schopenhauer's praise of art and beauty is a result of its "will-calming" effect and because "the beautiful *promises* happiness" (73). Beauty, and Schopenhauer's praise of beauty, Nietzsche claims, released Schopenhauer from the tortures of sexuality and longing.<sup>18</sup>

So far, this is an elaboration of the fact offered in the first section; it is a claim asserting a causal relation between the praise of beauty and the (waning) strength of sexual desire.<sup>19</sup> Then comes the interesting part, the point at which Nietzsche *explicitly tells us he will interpret the facts*: "For one must first *interpret this set of facts*: in itself it stands there, stupid to all eternity" (75, my emphasis). And following this, he does exactly what he said he would:

Every animal, thus also *la bete philosophe* [the philosophical animal], instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can vent its power completely and attain its maximum in the feeling of power; just as instinctively, and with a keenness of scent that 'surpasses all understanding,' every animal abhors troublemakers and obstacles of every kind that do or could lay themselves across its path to the optimum (GMIII:7, 75).

Nietzsche claims here that the reason *why* the ascetic ideal is adopted – and thus why beauty is regarded as good – is because an animal seeks to "vent its power," and embracing the ascetic ideal allows it to do just that. Immediately we notice Nietzsche talking in the same language as he did in BGE 13, where he discusses Spinoza and "superfluous teleological principles." Clark argued that Nietzsche is

interpreting a set of facts in that section, and his interpretation involves a superfluous teleological principle as well, namely, that an animal “seeks” to vent its power. Now we find that in GM III:7 Nietzsche *repeats* this interpretation, and moreover, *explicitly tells us that this is interpretation.*

Consider now GM III:8, where Nietzsche claims that by embracing the values of the ascetic ideal the philosopher puts himself in a position to live a life free from luxury and so one conducive to inventiveness. That is further elucidation of the fact offered in the first section. Then, however, Nietzsche offers the following: “But it [the will, or choice, of the philosopher] did it [embraced the ascetic ideal] precisely as the *dominant* instinct that forced through all its demands against those of all other instincts” (76). And in the same section, a bit later:

In this [embracing the ascetic ideal] there is nothing of chastity out of any ascetic scruple and hatred of the senses, just as little as it is chastity when an athlete or jockey abstains from women: rather it is their dominant instinct that wants it this way, at least during times of great pregnancy (78).

Finally, Nietzsche tells us again he is interpreting:

“Incidentally, piece together the above discussed case of Schopenhauer *according to this interpretation*: in him the sight of the beautiful apparently acted as a triggering stimulus on the *principal force* of his nature (the force of contemplation and of the engrossed gaze); so that

this then exploded and became all at once lord of his consciousness”  
(78-9, the first emphasis is mine).

Nietzsche offers here *exactly* the same sort of interpretation offered in BGE 22. He takes the text that is the set of Schopenhauer’s desires and instincts and then claims that some desires bend to the dominant instinct: the “*dominant* instinct...forced through all its demands against those of all other instincts.” This echoes Nietzsche’s claims in BGE 22, where he claims that one could see the workings of nature as the “pitiless execution of power claims.” There he spoke of nature, while here he speaks of Schopenhauer’s nature.

*C. Interpreting the priests.* Let us now turn to another fact offered in the first aphorism: the ascetic ideal means “among priests the true priests’ faith, their best tool of power, also the ‘most high’ permission to power.” Nietzsche spends much of his time, in sections 11-13 of the third treatise, interpreting this fact in precisely the way we have been describing.

In section 11 Nietzsche says “the ascetic priest has not only his faith in that ideal but also his will, his power, his interest. His *right* to existence stands and falls with that ideal” (83):

[The priest] relates our life (together with that to which it belongs: ‘nature,’ ‘world,’ the entire sphere of becoming and of transitoriness) to an entirely different kind of existence, which it opposes and excludes...[and] he *demand*s that one go along with him; where he can, he forces *his* valuation of existence (83).

This is, so far, an expansion of the fact; it is a causal explanation of how the priest relates to the ascetic ideal. The priest is a person who, believing in a particular ideal, a set of valuations, offers his valuation to others, and these people accept it. The priest thereby attains power, insofar as he is able to convince people that they should see the world through his evaluative lenses, they should continue to do so, and recognize him as their spiritual leader. This is the “text” that stands in need of interpretation.

Later, in III:11, Nietzsche gives us *two* (compatible) interpretations of the text:

For an ascetic life is a self-contradiction: here a *ressentiment* without equal rules, that of an unsatiated instinct and power-will that would like to become lord not over something living but rather over life itself, over its deepest, strongest, most fundamental preconditions...here the gaze is directed greenly and maliciously against physiological flourishing itself...we stand here before a conflict that *wants* itself to be conflicted, that *enjoys* itself in this suffering and even becomes ever more self-assured and triumphant to the extent that its own presupposition, physiological viability, *decreases* (84).

The first interpretation is familiar to us, given our explication of the interpretation of the facts about the ascetic ideal and philosophers. There, we saw Nietzsche positing a superfluous teleological principle to the effect that a creature (the philosophical animal) strives to vent its power, and Schopenhauer’s dominant instinct forbade him certain (sexual) actions so that he could most effectively vent his power,

which, for a philosopher, is “the force of contemplation and of the engrossed gaze.” Now we see the positing of a similar principle in the priest. He too seeks to vent his “power-will,” but the manifestation of this is not in *contemplation*, but lies, rather, in *becoming lord over life itself*, in striving for physiological *failure*. That this positing of an instinct to dominate life itself is interpretation should be clear by now.

The second piece of interpretation is as follows: it is true that the ascetic priest preaches values that denigrate this world and human beings. He calls for humility, chastity, self-sacrifice, self-flagellation, and so on. He tells us this world, the one in which we live, is only a rest stop, an imperfect version of some other, perfect world, that lies just over the horizon. These are the facts to which Nietzsche is pointing at the beginning of III:11. But the interpretation consists in Nietzsche’s claim that the priest seeks to decrease *physiological* viability. Nietzsche criticizes the priest for trying to “use energy to stop up the source of energy,” for becoming “ever more self-assured and triumphant to the extent that its own presupposition, physiological viability, *decreases*” (84). As evidence that this is an interpretation we need only look to the beginning of the very next section (GM III:13), where Nietzsche once again explicitly tells us this is interpretation:

In an accounting that is physiological and no longer psychological, a contradiction such as the ascetic seems to represent, ‘life *against* life,’ is – this much is immediately clear as day – simply nonsense. It can only be *apparent*; it must be a kind of provisional expression, an *interpretation*, a formula, arrangement, a psychological misunderstanding of something whose actual nature could not be understood for a long time” (85-6, my emphasis on ‘interpretation’).

**D. *Engaging in the art of interpretation.*** Let us now ask why Nietzsche gives the particular interpretations he does. More specifically, in what way is he engaging in an art of interpretation? According to the understanding of “an art of interpretation” offered above, we ought to think that Nietzsche is not only falsifying the object of interpretation, but also that he is making it more beautiful, attractive, and alluring; how is he making the facts contained in the first section of the third treatise more beautiful or inviting?

One clear instance in which Nietzsche has falsified facts so as to make them more beautiful is his positing a superfluous teleological principle of an animal seeking to vent its power, and we saw this interpretation applied to Schopenhauer and the priest as well. Nietzsche, at least, finds a world filled with various power claims beautiful (while the physicists find a world that obeys laws comforting). But what is so beautiful about the priest seeking to decrease physiological viability? Is this interpretation just meant to knock the priest and his project, so that Nietzsche’s position can look better? This cannot be right, because then he is not engaging in the art of interpretation because the interpretation offered would not make the object more beautiful. So there must be something else going on.

And indeed, there is. Nietzsche refers to the priest as “an incarnate will to contradiction and anti-nature” (III:12) and that “we stand here before a conflict that *wants* itself to be conflicted, that *enjoys* itself in this suffering and even becomes ever more self-assured and triumphant to the extent that its own presupposition, physiological viability, *decreases*” (III:11). What we see here is “‘life *against* life,’” (III:13) *life fighting itself*, life itself seeking to destroy life. What we have here is something that fights itself, that tries to *overcome* itself, and this results in an

affirmation of life and living. What we have here is the very Nietzschean value of *self-overcoming* manifested by life itself, which, to Nietzsche, is beautiful.

This is not mere speculation regarding how Nietzsche might have thought life fighting life is a case of self-overcoming and (thus) beautiful, for in an earlier work, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche has the following to say in a section entitled “On Self-Overcoming”:

And *life itself* confided this secret to me: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am *that which must always overcome itself*. Indeed, you call it a will to procreate or a drive to an end, to something higher, farther, more manifold: but all this is one, and one secret...[A]nd verily, where there is perishing and a falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself—for power...Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but—thus I teach you—will to power (my emphasis on ‘life itself’).<sup>20</sup>

It is thus clear that Nietzsche thinks the notion of life fighting itself is a) found within an interpretation, and b) is a metaphor for self-overcoming and the will to power. Thus, when Nietzsche offers an interpretation of the priest as one who seeks to decrease physiological viability, as one who represents life against life, Nietzsche is not merely knocking the priest with his interpretation, but is rather beautifying, in Nietzsche’s eyes at least, what the priest is, *viz.* the embodiment of self-overcoming by life itself.

The priest, as said, does not actually decrease physiological viability, that would be “nonsense” and is only an interpretation. As for what actually does happen:

The ascetic priest is the incarnate wish for a different existence, an existence somewhere else, and in fact the highest degree of this wish, its true fervor and passion: but the very *power* of his wishing is the shackle that binds him here; in this very process he becomes a tool that must work at creating more favorable conditions for being-here and being-human...The ascetic priest, this seeming enemy of life, this *negating one* – precisely he belongs to the very great *conserving* and *yes-creating* forces of life...The ‘no’ that he [the priest] says to life brings to light an abundance of tender ‘yes’s’; even when he *wounds* himself, this master of destruction, self-destruction – afterwards it is the wound itself that compels him to *live*” (III:13).

## V. Summary and Concluding Thoughts

A. *Nietzsche’s lesson.* Nietzsche tells us in section 8 of the preface of GM that he will interpret the first aphorism of the third treatise and that for this an art of interpretation is needed. It should be clear by now how he performs this art of interpretation. But we should learn more than just this, more than how Nietzsche interprets the facts of the first aphorism. We should be learning *how to read*. As Nietzsche says in his preface “To practice reading as an *art* in this way one thing above all is necessary, something which these days has been unlearned better than anything else.” Nietzsche has given us, among other things, a means of practicing the art of reading. He gives us facts, and then he interprets them. And moreover, *he tells us when he is interpreting so we learn how to disentangle fact from interpretation.* This is important not only for reading the third treatise, but for reading other works by Nietzsche as well.<sup>21</sup>

**B. *Other implications and questions.*** We have not endeavored to reveal all of Nietzsche's interpretations of the first aphorism of the third treatise (after all, it took Nietzsche the entire third treatise), but we have pointed in a direction in which we can make progress towards understanding the third treatise of GM. Further, in the course of demonstrating all this we have come upon several arguments against two prominent readings of Nietzsche. First, the arguments offered here strongly suggest that one conception of Nietzsche's moral psychology is misguided. I am thinking here of Brian Leiter's claim that Nietzsche thinks there is a psychological entity, the "will to power" that explains behavior.<sup>22</sup> In the previous section we offered many arguments for thinking that, while Nietzsche offers explanations of behavior by reference to the will to power, such explanations are interpretations; they refer to a non-existent entity. Second, this paper argues for a position according to which Nietzsche distinguishes between interpretations, which are offered from an (evaluative) perspective, and fact, and it marshals quite a bit of textual evidence for that claim. In arguing for its thesis, then, the paper provides strong evidence for thinking false an understanding of Nietzsche's perspectivism that entails the claim that, according to Nietzsche, there are only perspectival truths.

This paper has left for further inquiry some interesting and important questions. Nietzsche's attitude towards interpretations is rather cavalier. As quoted above: "Granted, this is only an interpretation too – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well then, so much the better." One wonders how he can maintain this attitude, and what attitude we ought to have towards interpretations. We cannot believe they are true; they are, after all, false explanations. But neither are we to dismiss them; Nietzsche seems to embrace his interpretations and recoil from the interpretations of others. But in what does such embracing consist? Mere

preference? The claim to their truth within a fiction (that we pretend to occupy)? Whatever the answer it is worth examining how such an embracing could aid us in flourishing or self-overcoming, and thus why, ultimately, Nietzsche thought it so important to teach us how to engage in the art of interpretation. Without an answer to such questions we lack a complete understanding of what Nietzsche wanted to tell us about morality.

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<sup>2</sup> All page references to *The Genealogy of Morality* are from the translation by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The English word ‘interpretation’ is used to translate the German words ‘*Interpretation*’ and ‘*Auslegung*.’ For a discussion of this fact and how it relates to the arguments presented in this paper, see endnote viii.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilcox, “What Aphorism Does Nietzsche Explicate in *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35.4 (October 1997), 593-610. Maudemarie Clark, “From the Nietzsche Archive: Concerning the Aphorism

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Explicated in *Genealogy* III,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35.4 (October 1997), 611-614. Christopher Janaway, “Nietzsche’s Illustration of the Art of Exegesis,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 5.3 (December 1997), 251-268.

<sup>5</sup> “That Exegesis of an Aphorism in *Genealogy* III: Reflections on the Scholarship,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 27 (1999), 448-462.

<sup>6</sup> Wilcox (1999), 454.

<sup>7</sup> Wilcox, Clark, and Janaway published their respective articles in 1997. Only two years later (in 1999) Wilcox mentions the philosophers who have contacted him to register their agreement. See footnotes 22 and 38 in Wilcox 1999. In the body of the text Wilcox also gives Werner J. Dannhauser and Werner Stegmaier credit for correctly, or almost correctly, properly identifying the first section as the aphorism to be interpreted. See pages 453-456 for Wilcox’s discussion of them.

<sup>8</sup> This translation is from Judith Norman’s translation of *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2002): 22.

<sup>9</sup> There are numerous other references to “interpretation” in the third treatise that either recapitulate the understanding of interpretation offered thus far, or are at least perfectly in line with it; see sections 13, 17, 23, 24, and 28. Note that in section 13 he uses the German ‘*Auslegung*’ and yet the meaning is identical to the meaning ‘*Interpretation*’ has in other sections. In section 17 he uses “*Auslegung*’ in one sentence, and then, in the very next sentence, uses ‘*Interpretation,*’ and in section 23 he switches back and forth several times between the two, with no discernible difference in meaning. Thus we have extremely strong grounds for believing that he uses the terms interchangeably. Also see *Gay Science*, section 353, in which Nietzsche discusses how the founders of religion have interpreted practices (facts, phenomena) that are already present in a society according to new values, the values

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of the interpreter, until everyone bowed to this interpretation (as represented with great force in GMIII:23). Also see GMII:12 and 13, and more specifically, the reading of the former given by Clark in her article, “Nietzsche’s Doctrine of the Will to Power: Neither Ontological nor Biological” *International Studies in Philosophy* 32.3 (2000). Lastly, see Daybreak 119, where Nietzsche claims that variance in the content of our dreams is the result of different interpretations of one and the same text: our nervous system.

<sup>10</sup> The translation is from Walter Kaufmann’s edition (New York: Vintage Books: 1974), pp. 239-240.

<sup>11</sup> The translation is from Walter Kaufmann, The Portable Nietzsche (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1954). 635.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 650 (section 59).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 651 (section 59).

<sup>14</sup> Maudemarie Clark, “Nietzsche’s Doctrine of the Will to Power: Neither Ontological nor Biological,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 32.3 (2000): 119-135.

<sup>15</sup> Clark seems to agree with Kaufmann’s translation in saying that a living thing “seeks” to discharge its energy. For the sake of consistency with other passages I have quoted from BGE, I have used Judith Norman’s “wants” when I quote this particular passage, though in discussing the passage I switch freely between the two.

<sup>16</sup> It might be, for example, that animals survive not because they have the overall goal of survival or of venting strength, but rather that they have a host of particular, short-sighted desires – e.g. the desire to eat now, sleep now, run away now, and so on – the satisfaction of which result in survival and the discharging of strength. Nietzsche is, then, offering a false picture of the world; there is no actual will to

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power, no actual “*instinct for freedom*,” just as there is no instinct for self-preservation. “That *instinct for freedom* (speaking in my language: the will to power)” (GMII:18, 59).

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche may use “spirituality” to designate a number of other ideas, but I am not concerned with this issue here; this understanding of “higher spirituality” suffices for my purpose.

<sup>18</sup> “In all questions relating to Schopenhauerian philosophy, by the way, one must never ignore the fact that it is the conception of a twenty-six-year-old young man; so that it participates not only in that which is specific to Schopenhauer but also in that which is specific to that season of life” (73).

<sup>19</sup> Notice that Nietzsche takes this discussion of Schopenhauer to be representative for all philosophers when he tells us that not only Schopenhauer, but *all* philosophers have always had an “irritability and rancor against sensuality...[and a] prepossession and cordiality regarding the whole ascetic ideal” (74-5).

<sup>20</sup> The translation is from Walter Kaufmann, The Portable Nietzsche (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1954), 227.

<sup>21</sup> We have already seen how our understanding of Nietzsche’s use of ‘interpretation’ affects our understanding of passages in GM, BGE, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and The Anti-Christ, but there are passages throughout Nietzsche’s works in which he employs this notion of interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> Brian Leiter, Nietzsche and Morality (London: Routledge), 2002. See especially pp. 138-144.