

Nietzsche and Habermas on *Wille zur Macht*: From a Metaphysical to a Post-Metaphysical Interpretation of Life

Abstract: Nietzsche and Habermas on *Wille zur Macht*: From a Metaphysical to a Post-Metaphysical Interpretation of Life. In this article, Shea aims to overturn Jürgen Habermas's characterization of Nietzsche in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* as a postmodern irrationalist. On Habermas's account, Nietzsche employs *Wille zur Macht* both as a principle by which to invalidate the claims of metaphysics and as a primordial "other" to reason that unmasks reason as an expression of domination. If Habermas's reading is correct, Nietzsche's work is ultimately incoherent since it either lapses back into metaphysics or puts forward a self-refuting anti-metaphysics. Contrary to Habermas, Shea argues that Nietzsche's theoretical inquiries result from a considered methodological decision on the part of Nietzsche to suspend metaphysical interpretations. For this reason, *Wille zur Macht* can be read as the fabrication of a post-metaphysical principle for interpreting life rather than as a purported insight into the ultimate nature of reality and thus as a genuine alternative to the trappings of both metaphysical and anti-metaphysical philosophies.

1. Introduction

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Jürgen Habermas claims that Nietzsche's work falls prey to "the aporias of a self-referential critique of reason that is bound to undermine its own foundations" (Habermas 1993, 104). The reason for this, he argues, is that Nietzsche undertakes an "unmasking" critique of reason that either, on the one hand, assumes the validity of its own position and thereby remains ensnared in the dialectic of enlightenment or, on the other hand, undermines entirely all standards of rational legitimacy and thereby calls into question the very foundation of his own critique. On either account, according to Habermas, Nietzsche's position lapses into a performative contradiction and is thus untenable. Overturning Habermas's misreading of Nietzsche as a postmodern irrationalist is significant since it continues to play a decisive role in shaping successive debates regarding the critical potential of Nietzsche's work, most especially regarding the place of Nietzsche's post-metaphysical philosophy in critical social theory. While commentators such as Fred Dallmayr defend Nietzsche by highlighting Habermas's disingenuous reduction of Nietzsche's *oeuvre* to ideas advanced in *The Birth of Tragedy*

(Dallmayr 2004), and Karin Bauer by situating Habermas's anxiety regarding Nietzsche's purported irrationalism within the context of Nietzsche's influence on Horkheimer and Adorno (Bauer 2004), neither author directly challenges Habermas's accusations of Nietzsche's work as contradictory or incoherent.

Here, I argue that in claiming that Nietzsche employs *Wille zur Macht* both as a principle by which to *invalidate* the claims of metaphysics and as the primordial "other" to reason that "unmasks" reason as an expression of domination, Habermas misreads Nietzsche's work as engaged in ideology critique—as unmasking illusions via an appeal to a primordial truth. By imputing such a project to Nietzsche, Habermas fails to account adequately for Nietzsche's "critique of truth," and thus not only attributes to Nietzsche a commitment to founding origins that Nietzsche himself repudiates, but in doing so also thereby renders Nietzsche's work unintelligible. As I will alternatively demonstrate, the coherence of Nietzsche's philosophical inquiries emerges only when we cease to read them as contradictory attempts to formulate an anti-metaphysics and regard them instead as proceeding from a "methodological decision" to suspend the metaphysical interpretation of life. Thus, contrary to Habermas, I will argue that Nietzsche's formulation of *Wille zur Macht* operates, not as a refutation of truth and reason, but rather as a reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical methodological principle for interpreting and evaluating life. In the end, by closely examining Habermas' criticisms of what he considers to be Nietzsche's critique of reason, I not only defend Nietzsche's work from the accusations of incoherence and contradiction, but I also establish the central role Nietzsche's methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation of life plays in conceptualizing Nietzsche as a post-metaphysical philosopher.

2. Habermas's Critique of Nietzsche

Habermas charges Nietzsche with appealing to an aesthetic experience that "enthrones taste, 'the Yes and the No of the palate,' as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil" (Habermas 1993, 96). Moreover, in doing so, Habermas claims that Nietzsche has confusedly pursued "a critique of ideology that attacks its own foundations" (Habermas 1993, 96). In

two short paragraphs in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas dismisses the entire Nietzschean enterprise arguing that by employing *Wille zur Macht* as a founding origin in order to undermine the legitimacy of reason, which thereby undermines the legitimacy and truth of any position, Nietzsche thus undermines the very legitimacy and force of his own position. On this reading, Habermas claims that Nietzsche is thus caught in a double bind: either Nietzsche engages in an aesthetic science, genealogy, that “unmasks” and “demonstrates” that *Wille zur Macht* is always at work in reason—which would undermine reason’s claims to objectivity, truth, and validity, and would thus in turn destroy genealogy’s own claims to scientificity and truth—or, Nietzsche appeals to the Dionysian experience of an obliterated and de-centered subjectivity as a foundational aesthetic experience that reveals itself as the suppressed “other” to reason—which would undermine the authority of all rational standards, and would thus in turn undermine the standards upon which Nietzsche could establish the authority of his own aesthetic preferences.

3. Nietzsche’s Mistrust of Metaphysics

In presenting my defense of Nietzsche, I will follow Alexander Nehamas in defining dogmatic metaphysics as that view that “aims to be accepted necessarily and unconditionally—not as the product of a particular person or idiosyncrasy but as the result of a discovery about the unalterable features of the world” (Nehamas 1987, 33). For this reason, dogmatic metaphysics does not merely aim to be a view amongst others but more significantly aims to be “an accurate description of the real world which forces its own acceptance and makes an unconditional claim on everyone’s assent” (Nehamas 1987, 32). In this way, every metaphysical account of existence aims to present itself as an incontrovertibly true account of the way things “really” are. The danger inherent in any critique of metaphysics, then, is the possibility of lapsing into dogmatic or Academic skepticism. As Ken Gemes notes, “To deny the existence of truth is *prima facie* paradoxical. Such denials invite the question ‘Is it true that there is no truth?’ To answer ‘Yes’ is to claim there is at least one truth, namely that there is no truth. To answer ‘No’ is to deny that there is no truth and hence

commit oneself to the claim that there is some truth” (Gemes 1992, 48). In either case, the position of Academic skepticism is self-refuting since it ultimately re-establishes the very assertions of truth that it aims to repudiate. Thus, in undertaking a critique of metaphysics, Nietzsche is faced with the Herculean challenge of tracing an alternative path that refrains from advocating either a form of dogmatic metaphysics or a form of equally dogmatic skepticism. In Section I, paragraph 21 of *Human, All Too Human*, entitled “The Probable Victory of Skepticism,” Nietzsche sketches an orienting framework for this alternative path:

Let us for once accept the validity of the skeptical point of departure: if there were no other, metaphysical world and all explanations of the only world known to us drawn from metaphysics were useless to us, in what light would we then regard men and things? This question can be thought through, and it is valuable to do so, even if we do for once ignore the question whether the existence of anything metaphysical has been scientifically demonstrated by Kant and Schopenhauer. For the historical probability is that one day mankind will very possibly become in general and on the whole *sceptical* in this matter; thus the question becomes: what shape will human society then assume under the influence of such an attitude of mind? Perhaps the *scientific demonstration* of the existence of any kind of metaphysical world is already so *difficult* that mankind will never again be free of mistrust of it. And if one has a mistrust of metaphysics the results are by and large the same as if it has been directly refuted and one no longer had the *right* to believe in it. The historical question in regard to an unmetaphysical attitude of mind on the part of mankind remains the same in both cases (HH 21, KSA 2, 42f).

In this paragraph, Nietzsche makes three points that are directly pertinent to conceptualizing his work as an alternative to metaphysics—that is, as “post-metaphysical.” First, Nietzsche is clear that he does not conflate a mistrust of metaphysics with the refutation of metaphysics. Thus, Nietzsche is explicit that he does not consider metaphysics refuted; he is not a dogmatic *anti*-metaphysician. Second, given this mistrust of metaphysics, however, Nietzsche tells us that he will proceed *as if* it has been refuted. In this way, Nietzsche makes a “methodological decision” to proceed philosophically on the alternative, conditional, and experimental basis that we are *without* a founding origin by means of which we could secure primordial truths concerning the way things “really” are; he is not a dogmatic metaphysician. Lastly, Nietzsche

provides an interpretative key in this paragraph for making sense of his later affirmative claims regarding life and existence: Nietzsche tells us in no uncertain terms that the commitment orienting his later critical inquiries is to theorize about this world and this life *as though* the metaphysical interpretation had been refuted—in other words, Nietzsche reveals to us that the aim of his work is to provide an interpretation of existence in which the metaphysical interpretation has been methodologically bracketed; he is post-metaphysical. Though Nietzsche himself never describes his work explicitly in terms of a “methodological decision,” this decision on Nietzsche’s part to suspend methodologically the metaphysical interpretation of life is decisive for establishing the tenability of post-metaphysical philosophy in general as a coherent theoretical alternative to metaphysical and anti-metaphysical philosophies.

4. Metaphysics and the Value of Truth

Significantly, Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation also includes a suspension of the conception of truth that metaphysics presupposes. According to Nietzsche, fundamental to metaphysics is the supposition that the value of a judgment stands or falls according to its truth or falsity. In this way, a judgment is valuable if and only if it is true. Since Nietzsche suspends methodologically the metaphysical interpretation, however, he stands on substantially different footing than the philosophers of whom he is mistrustful. More specifically, truth is not a criterion of which he can avail himself in measuring the worth of a judgment since his methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation prohibits him from appealing to the very criterion that he has bracketed. Thus, Nietzsche cannot appeal to truth as a criterion for measuring the worth of judgments without violating his own methodological commitments. Nietzsche himself is well aware of this constraint: “The falseness of a judgment is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgment: it is here that our new language sounds strangest” (BGE 4, KSA 5, 18). Nietzsche is explicit that he puts aside the metaphysical ideals of truth and

reality. For this reason, the post-metaphysical tools that Nietzsche fabricates for interpreting life do not purport to be primordial truths.

5. Life as a Post-Metaphysical Evaluative Criterion

In accordance with the above-mentioned methodological constraints, Nietzsche advances life as an alternative evaluative criterion to truth for measuring the value of his post-metaphysical judgments:

[Our] fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest of judgments (to which the synthetic *a priori* belong) are the most indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live – that to renounce false judgments would be to renounce life, would be to deny life (BGE 4, KSA 5, 18).

In his commitment to employing “untruths” in the name of life—of which the affirmation of life as a value is itself an “untruth” in the service of life—Nietzsche decisively places himself outside the confines of the metaphysical interpretation. Significantly, Nietzsche draws the full consequences of this decision: “To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil” (BGE 4, KSA 5, 18). Here, Nietzsche makes it known that as soon as one suspends methodologically the metaphysical interpretation, one thereby brackets the metaphysico-philosophical moral imperative to employ truth as a standard by which to measure the value of one’s judgments and, in doing so, one renounces the entire metaphysico-philosophical moral apparatus that demands that one’s values, concepts, and judgments accord with an essential insight into the way things “really” are. In this way, one frees oneself from the metaphysico-philosophical moral prohibition against the false, the untrue, and the uncertain in the fabrication of one’s values, concepts, and judgments about life.

6. Wille zur Macht

It is within the context of these methodological constraints that Nietzsche fabricates *Wille zur Macht* as a post-metaphysical principle for interpreting and

evaluating life. On Nietzsche's account, "[Life] itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation [...]. 'Exploitation' [...] pertains to the *essence* of the living thing as a fundamental organic function; it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will to life" (BGE 259, KSA 5, 207f). Simply put, "A living thing desires above all to *vent* its strength – life as such is will to power" (BGE 13, KSA 5, 27). Despite the strong language on Nietzsche's part, he informs us that *Wille zur Macht* does not stand as a new dogmatic metaphysics:

Someone could come along who, with an opposite intention and art of interpretation, knew how to read out of the same nature and with regard to the same phenomena the tyrannically ruthless and inexorable enforcement of power-demands – an interpreter who could bring before your eyes the universality and unconditionality of all 'will to power' in such a way that almost any word and even the word 'tyranny' would finally seem unsuitable or as a weakening and moderating metaphor – as too human – and who nonetheless ended by asserting of this world the same as you assert of it, namely that it has a 'necessary' and 'calculable' course, but *not* because laws prevail in it but because laws are absolutely *lacking*, and every power draws its ultimate consequences every moment. Granted this too is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to raise this objection? – well, so much the better. – (BGE 22, KSA 5, 37).

Nietzsche himself precisely reminds us that *Wille zur Macht* is merely one interpretation of life amongst others and is not to be regarded as a primordial truth concerning the essential nature of reality. As Maudemarie Clark notes on this very point, "Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power is not a doctrine at all. Although Nietzsche says that life is will to power, he also gives us clues that he does not regard this as a truth or a matter of knowledge, but as a construction of the world from the viewpoint of his values" (Clark 1991, 227). Thus, Nietzsche's characterization of life as *Wille zur Macht* remains coherently within the methodological constraints he established for himself—the suspension of the metaphysical interpretation gives way to the *fabrication* of a reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical post-metaphysical principle for interpreting and evaluating life.

7. In Defense of Nietzsche

Returning to Habermas's critique of Nietzsche, there are several points with which to take issue. First, implicit in Habermas's criticisms appears to be his own commitment to the dialectic of enlightenment—that is, Habermas seems committed *in advance* to a conception of philosophy that operates along the lines of a mutually exclusive division between legitimacy and illegitimacy, and whose sole aim is to “unmask” illegitimate forms of thought via an appeal to a more legitimate form of thought—namely, one founded in a truth disclosed through reason. Consequently, Habermas reads Nietzsche as similarly engaged in the task of advancing a legitimate form of thought that is supposed to disclose the illegitimacy of other forms of thought via an appeal to a founding origin. And, in this case, Habermas reads Nietzsche as claiming that the Dionysian experience of self-oblivion discloses *Wille zur Macht* at the very core of reason and thereby as corrupting and rendering illegitimate all forms of rational thought. This is why Habermas says of Nietzsche:

On the one hand, Nietzsche sees the possibility of an artistic contemplation of the world carried out with scholarly tools but in an antimetaphysical, antiromantic, pessimistic, and sceptical attitude. Because it serves the philosophy of the will to power, a historical science of this kind is supposed to be able to escape the illusion of belief in truth. Then, of course, the validity of that philosophy would have to be presupposed. That is why Nietzsche must, on the other hand, assert the possibility of a metaphysics that digs up the roots of metaphysical thought without, however, itself giving up philosophy. He proclaims Dionysus a philosopher and himself the last disciple and initiate of this god who does philosophy (Habermas 1993, 96-97).

The very attribution of the term ‘validity’ to what he calls “the philosophy of the will to power” indicates that Habermas situates Nietzsche's work squarely within the dialectic of enlightenment. For this reason, Habermas overlooks Nietzsche's methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation since he would not otherwise attribute to Nietzsche's work a claim to validity that Nietzsche himself explicitly brackets. Thus, in situating Nietzsche's work within the “unmasking” mechanisms of the dialectic of enlightenment, Habermas disregards the methodological procedure by which Nietzsche takes leave of the dialectic, metaphysics, and dogmatism. Moreover, so long as Habermas reads

Nietzsche as engaged in the tasks of “refuting” or “invalidating,” Nietzsche must of necessity remain trapped in the dialectic—worse, Nietzsche’s work *must* appear contradictory and incoherent. However, as I have argued, attributing the project of an “unmasking” and “vitiating” critique of reason to Nietzsche conflicts with what Nietzsche actually says regarding his “mistrust” of metaphysics and his methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation.

Secondly, given Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation, it would be quite out of step with this methodological commitment, as Habermas would have it, for Nietzsche to assert that the Dionysian experience of a de-centered subjectivity reveals “the world [...] as a network of distortions and interpretations for which no intention and no text provides a basis” (Habermas 1993, 95) since even a primordial aesthetic experience revealed via a mystical intuition would nonetheless carry with it the weight of a metaphysical interpretation of life. In other words, even an aesthetico-mystical experience of a founding origin—even if it secured the truth of an irrational “other” to reason—would remain mired in the forms of metaphysical dogmatism that Nietzsche himself unambiguously strives to evade. Thus, since Nietzsche is of his own admission not a dogmatist, since he suspends methodologically the metaphysical interpretation, it cannot be the case that he appeals to an aesthetico-mystical experience of a de-centered subjectivity so as to disclose existence as *Wille zur Macht*—to do so would be to run in direct contrast to very commitments of his post-metaphysical project. Therefore, despite Habermas’s claims to the contrary, *Wille zur Macht* cannot be considered a mere “metaphysical conception of the Dionysian principle” (Habermas 1993, 95). Rather, as I have demonstrated, *Wille zur Macht* arises from Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysico-philosophical moral imperative to accord with the truth and is thus, as an alternative to dogmatic metaphysics, the *fabrication* of a “post-metaphysical principle” for interpreting life.

Nietzsche is not unaware of the theoretical precariousness of his method. As he says precisely in regard to his own philosophical endeavors, “One seeks a picture of the world in that philosophy in which we feel freest; i.e., in which our

most powerful drive feels free to function. This will also be the case with me” (N 1883, 8[24], KSA 10, 342 [WP 418])! In other words, Nietzsche is “honest” with us that the project of advancing life via *Wille zur Macht* is, in the end, ultimately Nietzsche’s own personal way of overcoming the problem of nihilism and of giving meaning to his life. *Wille zur Macht* is the post-metaphysical interpretation of life that most enhances Nietzsche’s sense of power, and therefore makes him feel freest. Thus, Nietzsche tells us in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

I came to my truth by diverse paths and in diverse ways: it was not upon a single ladder that I climbed to the height where my eyes survey my distances. And I have asked the way only unwittingly – that has always offended my taste! I have rather questioned and attempted the ways themselves. All my progress has been an attempting and a questioning – and truly, one has to *learn* how to answer such questioning! That however – is to my taste: not good taste, not bad taste, but *my* taste, which I no longer conceal and of which I am no longer ashamed. ‘This – is now *my* way: where is yours?’ Thus I answered those who ask me ‘the way’. For *the* way – does not exist (Za III, ‘Of the Spirit of Gravity’ 2, KSA 4, 245)!

And also in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Are they friends of ‘truth’, these coming philosophers? In all probability: for all philosophers have hitherto loved their truths. But certainly they will not be dogmatists. It must offend their pride, and also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman, which has hitherto been the secret desire and hidden sense of all dogmatic endeavors. ‘My judgment is *my* judgment: another cannot easily acquire a right to it’ – such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say (BGE 43, KSA 5, 60).

Nietzsche is clear that his philosophical deployments of *Wille zur Macht* are not supposed to stand as dogmatic doctrines. In this way, there is nothing coercive about Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical philosophy of *Wille zur Macht*. We are under no compulsion to accept it as true since it is fabricated out of a methodological suspension of—and as an alternative to—the metaphysico-philosophical moral imperative to accord with the truth. Thus, Nietzsche himself is clear that we need not read *Wille zur Macht* or his later genealogies as dogmatic metaphysical descriptions of reality to which we *must* assent.

8. Conclusion

In the end, Habermas's insistence that Nietzsche's work is incoherent and self-refuting, that Nietzsche is engaged in a critique of reason that undermines its own foundations since it undermines the foundations for all critique, is wholly untenable. As I have shown, Nietzsche's mistrust of metaphysics is meant neither as a refutation of the existence of founding origins nor of the metaphysical systems they presuppose. Likewise, *Wille zur Macht* is not meant to stand as a new metaphysical principle born from an aesthetico-mystical insight into the ultimate nature of reality nor as a principle by which to "unmask" the tyranny of reason. Instead, *Wille zur Macht* is a post-metaphysical principle fabricated for the purpose of interpreting and evaluating life. Thus, Nietzsche's various interpretations of metaphysics throughout his oeuvre are not meant to be "critiques of reason" in the sense in which Habermas alleges. While for Habermas it is precisely reason that operates as a mechanism by which to unmask false absolutes as illusions, as a founding origin upon which to erect the legitimacy of a position that can identify all illegitimacies, Nietzsche disavows just such origins and just such a project. Consequently, Nietzsche cannot be engaged in a self-refuting "critique of reason" since he is not engaged in the project of constructing an anti-metaphysics. Thus, as I have demonstrated, when we read Nietzsche as a "post-metaphysical philosopher," we can provide an alternative to Habermas's account of Nietzsche, one that is both viable and coherent.

This is not, however, to repudiate entirely Habermas's reading of Nietzsche. Habermas is correct that Nietzsche does indeed aim to take leave of the dialectic of enlightenment and that he does indeed aim to jettison the metaphysical standards of truth and falsity. However, unlike on Habermas's account, it is not the case that Nietzsche does so by appealing to an aesthetico-mystical experience of a founding origin, which would only draw Nietzsche back into metaphysics and thus only perpetuate the dialectic. Rather, Nietzsche draws the full consequences of his departure: he accepts "untruth" and perspective as the basic condition of life and hazards into the unknown, the uncertain, and the experimental. Thus, Nietzsche truly does exit the dialectic

and take root in the neo-mythical. Nietzsche's new myths tell the tale of *Wille zur Macht*, the eternal return of the same, free spirits, Übermenschen, philosophers of the future, and the genealogy of morals. However, Nietzsche's myths, precisely because they take leave of the dialectic, neither command nor elicit our allegiance. We are not coerced into accepting the "truth" of Nietzsche's myths. And, it is here that Habermas misses the very originality of Nietzsche's project. Habermas is correct, after modernity post-metaphysical philosophy cannot *return* to myth since pre-modern myth was still metaphysics. Myth can no longer serve us in its old guises. But, as Nietzsche suggests, "perhaps" metaphysical truth too is just one more myth: "It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than appearance; it is even the worst-proven assumption that exists" (BGE 34, KSA 5, 53). Thus, what Habermas misses is that as a *post-metaphysical* philosopher, Nietzsche goes *forward*—Nietzsche does not search for founding origins, instead he *fabricates*. And, it is here, resulting from a methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation of life and thereby the assumed value of primordial truths, that Nietzsche has something to offer those of us who consider ourselves post-metaphysical and post-foundational: the methodological courage to fabricate and experiment with new forms of thought and life.

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