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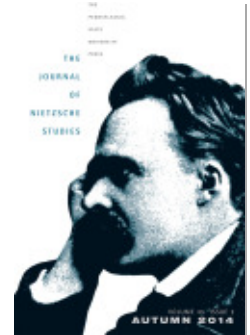
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## How Does the Ascetic Ideal Function in Nietzsche's Genealogy?

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## How Does the Ascetic Ideal Function in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*?

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LAWRENCE J. HATAB

It is remarkable that four commentaries on Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* will have been published within the space of one year—a testimony to how prominent the text has become in scholarship and college courses. Recently I had the great pleasure of convening with the other three authors—Dan Conway, Chris Janaway, and David Owen—to share and discuss our work. I can say with confidence that each of these authors has produced a first-rate study, and I am proud to share the stage with them.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there should be little concern about redundancy within this set of commentaries; each is written in a distinctive style, with distinctive interpretations, emphases, and perspectives on Nietzsche's complicated book—yet each with careful and expert attention to the text as written. So there is plenty of room for productive disagreement and cross-fertilization among these commentaries.

In my article I will focus on Nietzsche's discussion of the ascetic ideal in *GM* III.<sup>2</sup> In the course of my analysis I will indicate how my approach differs from those of the other three works when appropriate. Each of the other writers does a remarkable job examining this crucial part of *GM*. The contribution of my approach, I think, involves developing elements in Nietzsche's text that are either bypassed, underdeveloped, or developed in a manner that I would want to amend. Four topics that fit this scenario are the relationship between the ascetic ideal and nihilism, the meaning of the "metaphysical value of truth," the meaning and importance of life affirmation in the text, and Nietzsche's remark about art in relation to the ascetic ideal.

To get started, I believe that the fundamental question underlying *GM* is: Can there be meaning and value in natural life following the death of God? The eclipse of the supernatural in modern thought is a presumed turn to nature, but Nietzsche insists that this turn is in fact a looping reliance on the theological tradition and that the eclipse of God forces a more radical naturalistic challenge: If the Western tradition in one way or another is beholden to a nature-transcending or life-averse condition, then the loss of this condition's divine warrant undermines traditional sources of meaning and value, to the point where the West faces the choice between nihilism and a new, affirmative philosophy of nature.

*GM* is a quasi-historical study that fills out the details of the above scenario by trying to show how and why the tradition has been life averse and cannot

be sustained in the wake of modern developments. The genealogical history unfolding in the book is meant to simultaneously clarify and critique the counternatural drives in European culture, no less in its supposed departures from supernatural beliefs. The third essay focuses on the ascetic ideal as the organizing term for counternatural values, and the rhetorical force of this term is meant to disturb confidence in what Nietzsche takes to be the deepest, most extensive, and most comprehensive manifestation of the ascetic ideal: the will to truth. The ultimate target is a belief in an unconditional, binary model of truth that aims for immunity from any taint of otherness, and this model, according to Nietzsche, shows itself in modern science and philosophy no less than in transcendent religious systems.

*GM* III lays out the multiple ways in which the ascetic ideal has shown itself: in artists, scholars, philosophers, priests, and even science. Religious practices of self-denial are surely the connotation associated with *asceticism*, and yet Nietzsche applies the term to many nonreligious domains. Even though science, say, seems to have little in common with religious asceticism, Nietzsche is happy to retain the rhetorical force of asceticism because it keeps alive the fundamental question at the heart of *GM*: the value and meaning of natural life. Religious asceticism would likely admit its opposition to natural existence as such. Subsequent cultural developments might conceive of themselves as not religious in this sense, as not conflicted with natural life. Yet Nietzsche insists that these developments *continue* in different ways to harbor disaffection with core natural forces, and the retention of *asceticism* is meant to force the question of life denial on our attention throughout the essay. In this regard I appreciate Owen's distinction between asceticism, in the sense of ascetic practices, and the wider notion of the ascetic ideal.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche's critique of the Western tradition can be located in the claim that "the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*" (*BGE* 2). Religious and philosophical belief systems have operated by dividing reality into a set of binary opposites, which can be organized under the headings of being and becoming. The motivation behind such divisional thinking is as follows: Becoming names the negative, unstable, dynamic conditions of existence that undermine our interest in grasping, controlling, and preserving life. Being, as *opposite* to becoming, permits the governance or exclusion of negative conditions and the attainment of various forms of stability untainted by their fluid contraries. Nietzsche wants to challenge such priorities in the tradition, so much so that he is often taken to be simply reversing priorities by extolling sheer becoming and all its correlates. This is not the case, even though Nietzsche will often celebrate negative terms rhetorically to unsettle convictions and open up space for new meanings. In fact, Nietzsche exchanges oppositional exclusion for a sense of tensional relation, where the differing conditions in question are not exclusive of each other but, rather, reciprocally constituted (*BGE* 2).

In restoring legitimacy to conditions of becoming, Nietzsche advances what I call an *existential naturalism*. The finite, unstable dynamic of earthly existence—and its meaningfulness—becomes the measure of thought, to counter various attempts in philosophy and religion to “reform” lived experience by way of a rational, spiritual, or moral “transcendence” that purports to rectify an originally flawed condition (*GS* 109; *TI* “Reason” 16). In turning to “the basic text of *homo natura*” (*BGE* 230), Nietzsche is not restricting his philosophy to what we would call scientific naturalism, which in many ways locates itself on the “being” side of the ledger. For Nietzsche, nature includes forces, instincts, passions, and powers that are not reducible to objective, scientific categories. Nietzsche’s naturalism is consonant with scientific naturalism in rejecting “supernatural” beliefs, yet these beliefs are not “errors” in the strict sense but perspectival contestants for *meaning*. The source of supernatural beliefs, for Nietzsche, stems not from a lack or refusal of scientific thinking but from an aversion to overwhelming and disintegrating forces in nature that science too suppresses and wants to overcome. Nietzsche’s philosophical naturalism deploys earthbound forces of becoming to redescribe and account for all aspects of life, including cultural formations, even the emergence of seemingly antinatural constructions of “being.” The focus for this deployment can be located in Nietzsche’s concept of will to power.

Nietzsche writes, “The world viewed from inside . . . would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else” (*BGE* 36). A world of becoming, for Nietzsche, cannot simply be understood as a world of change. Movements are always *related* to other movements, and the relational structure is expressive not simply of differences but also of resistances and tensional conflicts (*WP* 568). Will to power depicts the idea that any affirmation is also a negation, that any condition or assertion of meaning must overcome some “Other,” some obstacle or counterforce. Nietzsche proclaims something quite important for understanding his concept of power: “Will to power can manifest itself *only* against resistances; therefore it *seeks* that which resists it” (*WP* 656; emphasis added). What is crucial here is the following: Since power can *only* involve resistance, then one’s power to overcome is essentially related to a counterpower. Will to power, therefore, cannot be understood in terms of individual states alone, even successful states, because it names a tensional force field, *within which* individual states shape themselves by seeking to overcome other sites of power.

This helps us understand some surprising ways in which Nietzsche depicts the ascetic ideal in *GM* III. In the course of fleshing out the life-denying tendencies of asceticism, in *GM* III:13, Nietzsche provides his most nuanced analysis of the ascetic ideal. He says that the “self-contradiction” of an ascetic “life *against* life” is only an apparent contradiction, only a provisional expression and interpretation—indeed, a “psychological misunderstanding” of the *reality* of the situation—which is presented as follows: even though the ascetic ideal may perceive itself as against life (this would be its metaphysical vision), from

a naturalistic standpoint he claims that this ideal “*springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life*, which uses every means to maintain itself and struggles for its existence.” In other words, when some forms of life are degenerating, are losing a more original natural vitality, life itself will engender different strategies (of power) to prevent an utter abnegation of life (suicidal despair, for instance). That is why Nietzsche says that the ascetic ideal is only a *partial* depletion of life instincts, the *deepest* of which “have remained intact” and which continually fight against sheer depletion “with new remedies and inventions.” The ascetic ideal is “one such remedy” that struggles against a death wish and thereby works “for the *preservation* of life.” Proof of such a preserving force, we are told, is the historical success of this ideal that came to rule humanity with extensive power, especially whenever civilizing developments brought a “taming” of the human animal.

Nietzsche calls the ascetic priest “the incarnate wish for being-otherwise, being-elsewhere.” But the *power* of such wishing is distinct from something “elsewhere” because it is a “binding” to life that makes the priest an *instrument* for life, for creating “more favorable conditions for being-here and being human.” The priest’s power makes him the creative champion and leader of the weak by shaping their life resentment into a meaningful form of existence. This is why Nietzsche says that the ascetic priest is only an “apparent enemy of life.” His negating posture “actually belongs to the really great *conserving* and *yes-creating* forces of life” (*GM* III:13).

At this point it must be asked: What is the difference between ascetic “affirmation” (yes-creating forces) and Nietzsche’s own ideal of life affirmation? Addressing this question may help illuminate the continuing ambiguity of Nietzsche’s critique of life-denying values. The problem at hand is that Nietzsche stands for life affirmation, and at the same time, throughout his writings he discusses beliefs that are called life preserving, life enhancing, life promoting, and even yes saying, when these beliefs are often the ones he attacks as life denying. To resolve this seeming paradox, I suggest that we adopt a distinction between *life affirmation* and *life enhancement*, where the former is Nietzsche’s ideal and the latter can be attributed even to ideals that are life denying in Nietzsche’s sense; two textual instances of these terms can be noted: *enhancement* (*Erhöhung*) in *BGE* 257 and *affirmation* (*Bejahung*) in *EH* Z:1. Although Nietzsche does not offer a precise, formal distinction along the lines of my suggestion, I believe that the distinction is implied in his texts.

For Nietzsche, *any* development of culture out of natural conditions and any innovation will require a dynamic of discomfort, resistance, and overcoming, that is, a contest with some Other. Nietzsche asks us not only to acknowledge this dynamic but also to be wary of its dangers, which are indicated in traditional constructs and their *polarization* of a conflicted field into the oppositions of good and evil, truth and error. The ascetic ideal in the end represents the desire

to escape the difficulty of incorporating the Other (*as other*) into one's field of operation. Affirmation, for Nietzsche, is anything but comfortable and pleasant; it means taking on the difficulty of *contending the Other without wanting to annul it*. A core message in *GM*, then, is that *every* perspective is mixed with its Other, because a perspective needs its Other as an agonistic correlate, since opposition is part of a perspective's constitution.

Life affirmation, in Nietzsche's strict sense, requires an affirmation of otherness, which is consistent with the tensional structure of will to power. Life denial stems from a weakness in the face of tensional becoming, an incapacity to affirm the necessity of otherness. Yet life-denying perspectives are life *enhancing*, because they further the interests of certain types of life who have cultivated their own forms of power that have had an enormous effect on world history. So, for example, Christianity is life enhancing (see *A* 34–35, 39–40) but not life affirming. Life-denying perspectives exhibit *local* affirmations of their form of life; this is why the ascetic priest can still be called a "yes-creating force." The sheer absence of life enhancement would amount to *suicidal* nihilism (*GM* III:28). Short of suicide, then, all forms of life aim to will their meaning, even if that meaning is a conviction about the meaninglessness of (natural) life.

Nietzsche's conception of life affirmation goes far beyond life enhancement; it aims for a *global* affirmation of all life conditions, even those that run counter to one's interests. To keep our bearings we need to keep in mind the following distinctions: (1) that between life enhancement and suicidal nihilism and (2) that between life affirmation and life denial. Nietzsche can extol the value of life-denying perspectives because of their life-enhancing power. But he can challenge these perspectives as falling short of life affirmation. In this way we may be able to make sense of the continuing shifts of rhetorical tone in the sections of *GM* III: shifts between polemic and appreciation with regard to the ascetic ideal.

*GM* III:23–25 represent the climax of Nietzsche's genealogical investigations, especially regarding the reach of the ascetic ideal. They also offer the most dramatic provocations in his approach to the question of truth. *GM* III:23 begins by stressing again Nietzsche's focus on the *meaning* of the ascetic ideal, rather than just its history. The *ideal* of asceticism, its *will*, is a grand, world-forming order of thought, a philosophical vision with enormous historical power. It possesses an overarching *goal* and has succeeded in shaping history according to its goal alone, suppressing any other interpretation. Nietzsche asks: Where is there an opposing ideal that can challenge "this closed system of will, goal, and interpretation?" Why is a counterpart *lacking* in history? Yet in the current age, he says, a counterideal is presumed *not* to be lacking. Modern science, after all, is considered "a genuine philosophy of reality," and it operates effectively without any reliance on God, otherworldliness, and self-denial. However, Nietzsche derides such "trumpeters of reality," who are unable to deliver anything relevant to his question. He says that "their voices do *not* come from the depths, the abyss

of scientific conscience does *not* speak from them.” The gist of the subsequent discussion, I think, is as follows. Modern science, for Nietzsche, is not the opponent of the ascetic ideal, for two reasons: (1) Science in the main is not driven by *any* ideal (and the ascetic ideal can only be opposed by a counterideal); (2) where science *can* achieve the level of an ideal, it is simply the most current manifestation *of* the ascetic ideal.

Regarding the first point, Nietzsche adduces what amounts to the normal practices of working scientists and scholars, who perform what he calls “much useful work” (he even says that he delights in their work). Yet he describes “the industry of our best scholars” as something lacking in any passion or vision for the *ideal* of science.<sup>4</sup> In historical terms we could say that what Nietzsche calls the “unreflective diligence” of scientific work is due to the *success* of modern science and the comfort of its establishment—which of course only came about after science had to *fight* for its status against countervailing cultural forces. If a counterideal to asceticism is to be found in science, Nietzsche has in mind a comprehensive philosophical passion, an ideal that has to be *willed* and which is not to be found simply in the established work of science and scholarship.

In *GM* III:24, Nietzsche considers the “rarer cases” among modern philosophers and scholars who do embody an ideal and who would assume themselves to be opponents of asceticism. These “unbelievers” are critical of any kind of faith or belief of the kind coming from ascetic tendencies. Nietzsche refers here to “we knowers” (a phrase first used in his preface), which can prompt questions about Nietzsche’s own participation in this sphere. It does seem that such unbelievers offer worthy nominees for Nietzsche’s counterideal to the ascetic tradition.

Nevertheless, the discussion takes a surprising turn. After the sketch of “we knowers,” Nietzsche asks with regard to their nomination: “What about this case?” He then shifts to the *third person* in depicting “these ‘no’-sayers and outsiders of today,” who demand “intellectual cleanliness,” who are the “heroic spirits [*Geister*] constituting the honor of our time.” He goes on to list examples of this contemporary ideal: “All these pale atheists, Antichrists, immoralists, nihilists, these skeptics, . . . these last idealists of knowledge in whom alone intellectual conscience dwells and is embodied these days,—they believe they are all as liberated as possible from the ascetic ideal, these ‘free, very free spirits.’” And they do seem very much like Nietzschean free spirits, so perhaps we are getting somewhere. But immediately we hear that these “heroic spirits” are themselves manifestations of the ascetic ideal! They themselves are currently its “most spiritualized [*vergeistigter*] product.” What is going on here? In nineteenth-century Europe there were surely a host of “free thinkers” of various stripes, whose aim was a liberation from all sorts of cultural constraints, be these religious, moral, political, artistic, or philosophical traditions. Yet Nietzsche does not seem to align himself with these “*so-called* ‘free spirits,’” because he claims that they have not become truly “free” from the counternatural tradition of the ascetic ideal.

Why? These modern figures “are very far from being *free* spirits: *because they still believe in truth.*”

The charge seems strange. How is it that these no-sayers who challenge traditional confidences are still bound by a belief in truth? Nietzsche even says that “precisely in their faith in truth they are more rigid and more absolute than anyone else.” Then he adds a personal remark: “Perhaps I am too familiar with all this out of proximity”—evoking again the ambiguity of Nietzsche’s own status in this scenario. Nevertheless, there is something emerging in these passages that Nietzsche is trying to distinguish from other modern developments, even when he himself is or has been caught up in them.

On this matter Conway is quite good on the complexities of the ascetic ideal, especially the *self*-overcoming of that ideal in philosophy. Yet I think he identifies Nietzsche’s moves too closely with the ascetic ideal (reading Nietzsche’s shift to the third person as “indirection”). Although the ascetic ideal is indeed implicated in Nietzsche’s own thinking, I think that he depicts a more positive potential for overcoming that ideal than Conway seems to allow. Conway suggests that the identification with the ascetic ideal is so strong that current philosophy can only amount to a self-critique, even a “suicide mission.”<sup>5</sup> Even for a Nietzschean spirit the only departure from the ascetic ideal seems to be the courage for self-cancellation on behalf of future hopes for stronger, healthier types. This reading seems too polarized to me (and more apocalyptic than my sense of the text would allow).

I believe that Nietzsche’s emphasis on certain modern trends targets at least two supposedly liberating forces that nonetheless are not free enough: (1) a scientific liberation from all sorts of beliefs based on custom, religion, authority, and so on; and (2) a philosophical liberation from an even wider range of beliefs—such as moral and political doctrines—to such an extent that it seems to verge into Nietzschean territory (recall the reference to atheists, Antichrists, and immoralists). What is it in these various liberations that prompts him to name them a continuation of the ascetic ideal?

I think the answer lies in the spirit of *confidence* such forces exhibit in their liberating moves, so that whatever that move may be (even if it is a nihilistic denial of meaning), it *replaces* the “errors” of other views, and so the liberated sphere is still in the service of “truth.” What renders this problematic for Nietzsche is that it does not accord with his own approach to truth, which is a matter of interpretation and perspective. In this passage he directly counterposes the dynamics of interpretation *against* these modern developments; indeed, they are said to *renounce* the spirit of interpretation—which, he says, expresses the ascetic ideal “just as well as any denial of sensuality” (*GM* III:24). Perhaps an example would help us fathom this surprising claim. It is unlikely that modern atheists would be satisfied with calling religion an interpretation, unless it could be called *mere* interpretation; yet this would not fit the radical perspectivism



Nietzsche is advancing. And these atheists would not likely be comfortable with their own position being called an interpretation, “mere” or otherwise.

For Nietzsche, it is the drive for a *secured* truth—even in a negative stance toward established truths—that is the core meaning of the ascetic ideal: “The *compulsion* toward it, the unconditional will to truth, is *faith in the ascetic ideal itself*, although as an unconscious imperative, make no mistake about it,—it is a faith in a *metaphysical* value, a *value of truth in itself*” (*GM* III:24). The mention of metaphysical value is an important indication of what may be going on here. We recall that Nietzsche defines metaphysics as “the faith in opposite values” (*BGE* 2), in formulations that *exclude* each other so that concepts can be secured from the infection of otherness. Nietzsche opposes metaphysics in this sense because he insists on a tensional dynamic that finds all concepts implicated with otherness; and this is why perspectivism cannot abide any sheer “refutation” of other perspectives. Therefore, with respect to Nietzsche’s charge against so-called free spirits, we could say the following: If a belief in modern science, or free inquiry, or radical skepticism moves one to champion these orientations as correcting the “errors” of the past, or superstition, or common sense, or mass opinion, or whatever—one is still caught up in a problematic will to truth, as Nietzsche sees it. A discontent with agonistic becoming and an impulse to surmount this tensional force by way of a secured warrant can take many forms, actually *any* form, whether it stems from religion, philosophy, science, skepticism, or even the posture of a “free spirit.” With respect to science as a form of the ascetic ideal, Owen is helpful in drawing the distinction between science and scientism, so that Nietzsche’s critique does not amount to a rejection of science.<sup>6</sup> But I wonder if this would leave us with the banal form of science sketched by Nietzsche, shorn of the battle of ideals that seems to interest him so much.

Returning to *GM* III:24, right after the passage quoted above, Nietzsche intimates his own perspectival concept of truth: The idea of knowledge without presuppositions is “unthinkable.” Prior to every form of knowledge there must first be a kind of “faith,” without which knowledge lacks “a direction, a meaning, a limit, a method, a *right* to exist.” To think otherwise, to think that knowledge can be secured against perspectival limits, to think, for instance, that philosophy can be placed “on a strictly scientific foundation,” is actually “*to stand on its head* not just philosophy, but also truth itself.” Nietzsche then quotes a passage from *GS* 344, which implicitly connects a modern faith in truth with the ascetic ideal: A faith in scientific truth, for example, “*thus affirms another world* from the one of life, nature, and history.” The belief in science “is still based on a *metaphysical faith*.” Things are no different, he says, even for “we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians.” It seems that the *antimetaphysical* posture here would sustain the binary thinking that constitutes a metaphysical faith (while *contending* with metaphysics would be a different story).

At the close of *GM* III:24, Nietzsche summarizes the problem: The *mastery* of the ascetic ideal over all of European thought is shown, not simply in particular forms of that ideal, religious or otherwise, but essentially in the fact that “truth was not *allowed* to be a problem.” In what sense? Certainly not in the problem of “where” truth should be found; there have been long-standing debates about whether truth should be located in sense experience, in reason, in God, and so forth. The problem that Nietzsche claims has been suppressed concerns the very idea of truth as a decisive standpoint set against “error,” its binary opposite. This is the esteemed *value* of truth that Nietzsche targets, the ascetic impulse to screen out any disturbance to a presumed truth, in whatever form a conviction may take, even an antimetaphysical conviction. Accordingly, a genuine alternative to the ascetic ideal would have to tackle conviction at this level, wherein “the value of truth is experimentally [*versuchsweise*] to be *put in question*.”

In *GM* III:25, Nietzsche concludes that science is not the *natural* opponent of the ascetic ideal because in the matter of truth it is likewise alienated from the unstable forces of natural life. As we have seen, religious asceticism is simply the most obvious and telling manifestation of the deeper issue animating Nietzsche’s philosophy: the diagnosis of life-alienating forces in human culture; *this* is the core meaning of the ascetic ideal, whatever form it takes. Obviously modern science—in both its history and its practice—has been antagonistic toward religion and transcendent doctrines in its drive for cultural authority. Yet Nietzsche insists that even with this contested relationship, science is still a manifestation of the *core* meaning of the ascetic ideal: “Its opposition and battle are, on closer inspection, directed not at the ideal itself but at its outer-works, its apparel and disguise, at the way the ideal temporarily hardens, solidifies, becomes dogmatic.”

Nietzsche then indicates how science is indeed more attuned to life than the transcendent versions of the ascetic ideal: “Science liberates what life is in it by denying what is exoteric in this ideal.” In other words, science opposes the “overt” manifestations of religion—its doctrines, theologies, and lifestyles—that do in fact stand in the way of something like science. Yet with respect to the core meaning of the ideal—which in this context could be called “esoteric” or “covert”—Nietzsche declares: “Both of them, science and the ascetic ideal, are still on the same foundation.” And right away he identifies this common foundation with the matter of truth.

After Nietzsche offers a provocative parenthetical remark about art being a better nominee for opposing the ascetic ideal (which I will take up shortly), he elaborates on how the alliance of science and asceticism can be understood in specific ways. The discussion focuses mainly on two elements: (1) how the practices and epistemological assumptions in science show a comparable antagonism toward more natural drives and (2) how certain results of the modern scientific worldview have reinforced or reconstituted a central feature of the ascetic ideal—that natural life on its own terms exhibits no intrinsic meaning.

To the first point, Nietzsche briefly discusses the ways in which scientific knowledge must fight off a host of natural dispositions, passions, and instincts in order to shape its aim toward an objective, disinterested understanding of nature. The second point requires some care in interpretation. Nietzsche continues to conflate the supposed differences between science and asceticism by taking up the “famous *victories*” of modern science over theology and religious worldviews. There surely *are* such victories, he says, but they do not support the familiar binary story of “natural science” overcoming and replacing “supernatural” beliefs. Nietzsche asks: Over *what* has science been victorious? Not the ascetic *ideal* but only certain of its outer trappings. In fact, with the victory of science, “the ascetic ideal was decidedly not conquered, it was, on the contrary, made stronger.”

Nietzsche then elaborates on an *ideal* shared by asceticism and science—despite the “outward” battle between their worldviews—and this ideal has to do with the meaninglessness of finite life, with the nihilistic erasure of meaning in the lived world. How can this be, when science deliberately separates itself from world-transcending beliefs and considers itself to be a highly meaningful endeavor? Nietzsche brings in the example of astronomy and asks if we can truly say that the Copernican defeat of theological astronomy was a defeat of the ascetic ideal. He thinks not, and it is here that the matter of a shared nihilism comes into play and the full complexity of the death of God is shown. If the modern alternative to God’s eclipse is simply modern science, then Nietzsche seems to think that the nihilistic core of the ascetic ideal has been not only sustained but even strengthened, because it can now rest on much more evident and “natural” grounds (and therefore no longer require a supernatural script).

We might comprehend Nietzsche’s move by considering the well-known self-conception of modern science as a radical transformation of how nature is to be understood by way of mechanical physics. The new mechanical model of nature was thoroughly dependent on mathematical measures, which could provide the maximal degree of “objectivity” and which could not be compatible with less measurable or immeasurable matters such as purposes and values (goodness, beauty, goals, etc.). This is the source of the famous fact–value divide, where nature is viewed as a value-free set of measurable facts and values are no longer intrinsic to nature (as they were in ancient and medieval thought). Nature is now simply matter in motion measured by a quantified space-time grid; nature as such has no aim or purpose. The location of *values* therefore had to be redirected to the human subject. Yet values could no longer be attributed to natural “reality” because they were now “merely” subjective states projected “upon” objective nature (a sunset is not “really” beautiful; it only appears so to us). As a consequence, the status of certain meanings was not only sectioned off but also demoted to the point where it would be possible to say that human life is not “really” meaningful in the sphere of nature. Such, I think, is the context in

which we can comprehend Nietzsche's subsequent remarks about astronomy in particular and science in general.

The reason why Nietzsche challenges in *GM* III:25 the victory of Copernican over theological astronomy is that the ascetic departure from natural meaning no longer requires a supernatural story because in effect it has perfected an *immanent* departure from natural meaning *within* a natural setting: "Has man perhaps become less *needful* of a transcendent solution to the riddle of his existence because his existence has since come to look still more arbitrary, more a loitering [*eckensteherischer*], and more dispensable in the *visible* order of things? Has not man's self-diminishment, his *will* to self-diminishment, been unstoppably progressing since Copernicus?" Nietzsche then alludes to the gradual reduction of human self-understanding to the "natural" condition of scientific findings, such as the "animal" characteristics given in biology. He goes on to say: "Since Copernicus, man seems to have been on a downward path . . . into the '*piercing* sensation of his nothingness.'" Nietzsche seems to declare that modern science is a manifestation of ascetic nihilism made more *actual* in a worldly sense. This is why he can say of the growing diminishment of human meaning in modern science: "Well! That would be the straight path—to the *old* ideal."

Conway addresses the remarks about Copernicus, whereas Janaway and Owen do not.<sup>7</sup> I am trying to push the meanings of these remarks, further, I think, than Conway, beyond the sense of human deflation to a stronger association with nihilism. Here is my take on Nietzsche's position: The original ascetic ideal found natural life meaningless and reached for transcendent relief. Modern science overcame religious transcendence, but with its *reductive* naturalism human meanings were robbed of their previous status and became superfluous in the natural order—despite (or because of) their being rendered merely "subjective" in modern thought. In this way science provides a *stronger* case for the meaninglessness of natural existence (compared with religious fantasy), and so within the sphere of natural life alone, *both* religion and science posit a lack of meaning. Moreover, since science restricts thought to the natural world, meaninglessness is now complete and exhaustive, because at least the old ideal provided the *solace* of an imagined deliverance. Nietzsche's argument seems to be that a reductive *scientific* naturalism is no less nihilistic than supernaturalism; it is even more dangerous because it can *consummate* nihilism if science is accepted as the only proper account of nature. What we are circling around here is the important matter of how Nietzsche's naturalism differs from scientific naturalism and how Nietzsche's approach would be looking for a natural *affirmation* of life meanings. That is why Nietzsche says that a strictly scientific picture of the world "would be an essentially *meaningless* world" (*GS* 373) and that the question of the *value* of existence lacks "any grain of significance when measured scientifically" (*GS* P:1). I note that Janaway recognizes and develops the importance of life affirmation in *GM*, especially in the treatment of the ascetic ideal.<sup>8</sup>

I have noted that the core question in Nietzsche's examination of the ascetic ideal seems to be the problem of truth. In his overall philosophy Nietzsche challenges the notion of an absolute, uniform, stable truth in favor of a dynamic perspectivism. There is no freestanding truth or purely objective, disinterested knowledge; rather, we can only think according to the perspectives of different and differing instances of will to power. Nietzsche has often been assumed to be denying any sense of truth or advancing a kind of relativistic phenomenalism. There is much ambiguity on the question of truth in Nietzsche's texts (and some shifting in the different periods), but I think it is plausible to say that he accepts and employs motifs of truth, as long as truth has been purged of metaphysical foundationalism and limited to a more modest, pluralized, and contingent perspectivism.

There are several motifs in Nietzsche's writings that can indicate a nonfoundational, pluralistic sense of truth that is disclosive of the world and yet open and nonreductive, and one of these motifs is art. Art operates as a primal metaphor for Nietzsche, because it is a presentation of meaning without the pretense of a fixed truth. Moreover, the meanings disclosed in art are what give human existence its bearings in the midst of the tragic truth of becoming: "We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*" (*WP* 822; see also *GS* 107). Art provides an effective setting wherein we can overcome a naive realism in philosophy and come to understand the *creative* dimension in thought (*GS* 58).

What can be said about the relationship between art and truth? Beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche seems to shape his naturalism in part by way of an intimate connection among nature, art, and tragedy, with the latter presenting an art world that best "imitates" the surging creative/destructive dynamic of nature (*BT* 2) and that least alienates humanity from finite nature. There is a clear connection between this early treatment in Nietzsche's work and the later critique of the ascetic truth ideal, especially with regard to science. In *BT*, Socratic reason is associated with the development of science (*BT* 15–16); and the later preface published in 1886 reflects on the book as a confrontation with "something frightful and dangerous . . . *the problem of science itself*, science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable" (*BT* "Self-Criticism" 2). The same passage coordinates this problem with the alternative of art and its life-serving power.

It is notable that Nietzsche signals this 1886 passage in his discussion of science and the ascetic ideal in *GM* III:25, published in 1887. And this signal follows the remark about art that I have postponed discussing until now. In the midst of his exposure of science as a continuation of the ascetic truth ideal, Nietzsche interjects: "*Art*, let me say at the outset, since I will deal with this at length some day,—art, in which *lying* sanctifies itself and the *will to deception* has good conscience on its side, is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than science is" (*GM* III:25). The anticipated work is named

in section 27: *The Will to Power: An Attempt at the Revaluation of all Values*, a book that in fact never came to fruition. Nevertheless, the issue at stake here is one that reaches all the way from the work on tragedy to *GM*, which I think can be gathered as follows: Tragic art represents a nature-attuned alternative to the counternatural nihilism of the ascetic truth ideal. Neither Conway nor Owen takes up Nietzsche's remark about art, although Owen does deploy the self-fashioning of art and artists as a model for free agency in Nietzsche.<sup>9</sup> Janaway does develop a reading of the remark, on which more below.

Although Nietzsche did not specifically follow through on his plans about art in a published work, the notebooks show much in this regard, and the published material following *GM* contains enough intimations of the question to merit some attention (see *TI* "Skirmishes" 8–11, 24). What would it mean to say that (tragic) art is a nominee for overcoming the binary model of truth in the ascetic ideal? And because I have argued that Nietzsche's opposition to this ideal does not rule out other senses of truth—one of which I have already associated with art—another question arises: What are we to make of Nietzsche's claim that the virtue of art is its valorization of lying and deception? Would we not be better off ignoring this idea, especially since an extended treatment never materialized? Perhaps. Yet I still believe that the matter of art and truth deserves attention because it gathers together topics that occupied Nietzsche's thinking from beginning to end, and it can prepare a path for understanding how his work presents an alternative approach to standard philosophical questions. For instance, I believe that there *are* plausible and cogent Nietzschean answers to questions about truth and morality and that such answers stem from a nuanced comprehension of the *tragic* structure of life and thought.

If there are such possibilities for a sense of truth in Nietzsche's philosophy, shouldn't we be troubled by his apparent celebration of lying and deception in the above passage? Indeed, such tropes abound in Nietzsche's writings, so how can this square with any sense of truth? The question is not easy to answer, but we can begin by recalling the ambiguous sense of *appearance* in Nietzsche's thought. There is a positive connotation of *appearance* as a "happening," which is consistent with a radical becoming; *appearance* in this sense would have to be distinguished from a "mere" appearance that conceals a "reality" and which thereby is parasitic on traditional standards of being and truth. Paraphrasing a passage from *TI*, if the traditional "real world" is ruled out, so too is the (merely) "apparent world" (*TI* "World" 6). Therefore, it cannot be the case that Nietzsche's own use of *appearance* would necessarily entail something "unreal" or "false," because that would sustain traditional (binary) models of reality and truth by simply flipping them around. I think that the same can be said for his celebration of artistic lying and deception.

It has long been understood that the realm of art—as a creative product of imagination—is something different from "real" things given to us in normal

experience and that art is not to be judged by the usual standards of truth and falsity (and it would be odd to say that one style of art “refutes” another style). As long as art is sectioned off as a sphere of culture from other spheres that do deal with truth (science, for example), then everything seems fine. Yet Nietzsche is challenging this kind of arrangement and even elevating art to a higher status. In doing so, I think it is plausible to say that he will often bank on the traditional *binary* models of reality/appearance, truth/fiction, and so on and advance the *deficient* side of the traditional opposition for rhetorical effect and provocation, for a shock to the system, so to speak. What recommends this rhetorical angle is that the tensional structure of will to power and perspectivism (Nietzsche’s alternative to binary thinking) could not entail simply the exchange of one binary opposite for another. Yet when Nietzsche advances artistic lying and deception, this seems to cross a line that tropes such as “appearance” or “fiction” need not draw us across. Is Nietzsche on thin ice here?

Several unpublished notes from the late 1880s repeat the language of *BT*, to the effect that art is a “lie” that saves human life from the “truth” of Dionysian disintegration, the ultimate consequence of a world of becoming. Measured against what I have called the tragic truth of becoming, Nietzsche deploys tropes of “deception” for *any* construction of meaning that cannot ultimately be preserved. Artistic deception in this sense marks *all* of human thought: “metaphysics, religion, morality, science—all of them only products of his will to art, to lie, to flight from ‘truth,’ to *negation* of ‘truth’” (*WP* 853). References such as these challenge the assumption among some scholars that Nietzsche abandoned his early antitruth talk in favor of a later commitment to an empirically based truth.<sup>10</sup> Owen seems to follow this reading to some extent. He is careful and right in denying that Nietzsche abandoned any sense of truth. But by my lights Owen seems to tame the drama of truth in Nietzsche by associating it with a movement toward a better understanding of beliefs in relation to life.<sup>11</sup> Janaway’s study is commendable for focusing on the rhetoric of *GM* as affective provocation rather than mere belief formation.

The critique of traditional thought systems amounts to this: they themselves are (artistic) creations with no ultimate foundation, yet they interpret themselves otherwise—they claim to be *true* and nothing like “art.” This is why *tragic* art is distinctive and so central in Nietzsche’s critique. Tragic art acknowledges not only its creative character but also the *abyss* at the heart of a creative model of thought, the absence of any secure foundation behind the coming forth of creative acts—an abyss that prompts the fugitive tendencies in the tradition. For Nietzsche, tragic art displays this recognition in both its *form* (Apollonian images against a Dionysian background) and its *content* (human meanings subjected to terrible limits and loss). Tragic art is therefore a sign of strength in a finite world, as opposed to the weakness that seeks refuge in some secured meaning (*WP* 852).

The *affirmation* of the tragic-creative character of thought would seem to lend more positive significance to artistic “deception.” Indeed, in the passage where Nietzsche depicts all of human thought as a truth-negating “lie,” he goes on: “This ability itself, thanks to which he violates reality by means of lies, this artistic ability of man *par excellence*—he has it in common with everything that is. He himself is after all a piece of reality, truth, nature: how should he not also be a piece of *genius in lying!*” (*WP* 853). The “deceptive” character of thought, therefore, is *intrinsic* to nature; it is evident in *any* form of life. If this is so, then the only measure of “truth” on the other side of deception is no measure at all, only a dissolving limit. If *everything* in life is a lie in this sense, then deception can have no derogatory sense—unless one were to call for a release from deception into, well, nothingness.

In trying to make sense out of Nietzsche’s rhetoric of deception, I am trying to make room for some modified sense of *truth* in the midst of this rhetoric. It seems that when Nietzsche wants to emphasize the tragic truth of becoming, he deploys a vocabulary of “lying” to depict forms of meaning. Yet it is also clear that Nietzsche’s philosophy displays more positive senses of truth that can still accord with radical becoming (such as perspectivism). Janaway makes a significant effort to explore the connections among the ascetic ideal, truth, life affirmation, and art in the third essay. He suggests that Nietzsche’s alternative to the ascetic truth ideal takes the form of two goals: “complete self-affirmation” and “aesthetic self-satisfaction”; the former aims for a nonascetic engagement with the truth of global meaninglessness, and the latter follows Nietzsche’s remark about art construed as the personal task of “falsifying” truth by way of the self-fashioning of meaning. These goals, Janaway says, are distinct to the point of at least being in tension, if not inconsistent, with one another. Janaway points to the “metaphysical” value of truth in this regard, but he does not develop the binary character of metaphysical thinking to the extent that I have.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, I have tried to intertwine art and truth in such a way that a binary of meaninglessness (truth) and art (falsification) can be avoided, so that the “inconsistency” of the two goals posed by Janaway might be resolvable. The ascetic-scientific truth ideal is a binary formation that *conceals* its own nihilistic implications. Unmasking this concealment need not create another binary of “truthfulness” and “falsification” (except possibly for rhetorical purposes). Janaway is to be lauded for recognizing the issue of art and truth in *GM* III, and his analysis is plausible and perhaps more attractive to some than my own. Yet I remain cautiously skeptical about a too strong counterpositioning of art and truth in Nietzsche’s thought.

To round out my discussion, I want to offer another brief venture into ancient Greek culture, which may help us better understand Nietzsche’s rhetorical choices about art and falsity. The Greeks were well aware, from the earliest times, that poetic performances depicted something different from “actual” events. Traveling bards would enthrall audiences with emotionally and musically



charged tales about gods and heroes—culturally significant events embellished with heightened language for maximum effect. And such performances were a “pause” set aside from normal life pursuits. What interests us is that a word commonly used to denote this “difference” was *pseudos*, usually translated as “false.” Yet the context of this use and the cultural status of poetry would undermine the idea that *pseudos* here denoted “falsehood” as the sheer opposite of truth.<sup>13</sup> In fact, *pseudos* was a single word with remarkable flexibility, the different senses of which could only be discerned in different contexts of use. Unlike our language, the Greeks used this same word to connote an “error” and a “lie,” that is, a mistaken statement about something and an *intentional* falsehood.

The attribution of “falsehood” to poetry, however, extends the ambiguity of *pseudos* even further. First of all, given the *competitive* nature of Greek poetry (a significant instance of the Greek *agōn*), individual poets would use *pseudos* to target other poets—in this context *false* would mean “inferior” or “ineffective” or “not *my* poetry.” More importantly, *pseudos* could refer to what we would call “fiction” as opposed to “fact,” yet not in the binary sense that we might expect. The Greek word often translated as “fact” is *ergon*, which had a general meaning of something *done* rather than something merely *said*—a distinction that could apply to the “different” sphere of poetic speech. The poetic sense of *pseudos* would be closer to what we would call “verisimilitude,” or fictive truth. In the Greek sense, fictive truth would refer not only to the way in which poetic language could “resemble” reality but also to its persuasive power to enthrall the audience and absorb it in the *reality* of the poetic fiction (eliciting wonder, joy, fear, etc.). It should be noted that this is precisely one of the basic meanings of the Greek word *mimēsis*—not merely representational likeness but the psychological *identification* of an audience with a poetic performance. Nietzsche himself recognized this mimetic power of poetic “appearances” in *BT*. Nietzsche recognized the world-disclosive effects of mimetic poetry in tragedy: He says that poetic images were not “symbolic” because they possessed a living capacity to create their own world (*BT* 8); here dramatic “fiction” was not a departure from reality because it staged powerful scenes of “a world with the same reality and irreducibility that Olympus and its inhabitants possessed for the believing Hellene” (*BT* 7).

If we keep reminding ourselves of the cultural status of poetry in the Greek world, then their attributions of *pseudos* to poetry (even in pre-philosophical periods) cannot be construed as simply critiques or even diminutions of poetic language—but, rather, among other things, as a gesture to the “different” sphere of poetry together with its revelatory power. Poetry could not simply be an “entertaining diversion” for the Greeks (akin to our enjoying works of fantasy), because the religious dimension of poetry carried world-disclosive and life-guiding significance. Even the notion of “fictive truth,” therefore, might not suffice for capturing the ambiguities surrounding the Greek sense of poetic *pseudos*.

One final historical note on the ambiguity of poetic falsehood: Certain texts tell of the commingling of pseudos and truth (*alētheia*) in poetic speech (e.g., Hesiod's *Theogony*).<sup>14</sup> And the *Odyssey* is marked by many alternations between deceptive and true accounts—sometimes mixed together, in the manner of verisimilitude and other senses.<sup>15</sup> The “cunning” character of Odysseus is a virtue in his precarious wanderings, and the mix of his false and true tellings can be considered contextually appropriate. What is more, as Charles Segal suggests, the many episodes of singing tales in the *Odyssey* show that the poem may be just as much about poetic speech per se—especially with respect to the wandering life of bards—as it is about a hero's homecoming.<sup>16</sup> A remarkable irony is that while wandering is connected in the *Odyssey* with a need to deceive, the Greek word for wanderer is *alēēs*, which is a variant of *alētheia*.<sup>17</sup> Since Nietzsche was a classical philologist, he was surely aware of the many complex senses in which Greek texts depicted poetry, falsehood, and truth. My hope is that this brief excursion into Greek material can help us understand the evident ambiguities in Nietzsche's own deployment of falsehood language in his celebration of art. What I have offered here is only a preliminary sketch of how we might begin to make sense of Nietzsche's remark about art/deception as an alternative to the ascetic ideal, a remark that I believe cannot be ignored or sidestepped in trying to comprehend the aim and reach of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*.

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## NOTES

1. Their texts are Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals": A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2008); Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's "Genealogy"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and David Owen, *Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality"* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2007).

2. Most of my essay is drawn from chapters 5 and 6 of my commentary: Lawrence Hatab, *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morality": An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For translations of Nietzsche's works, I use Carol Diethe's translation of *GM* in *On the Genealogy of Morality and other writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Walter Kaufmann's translation of *BGE* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Kaufmann's translation of *GS* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Kaufmann's translation of *BT* (1967); Kaufmann's translations of *TI* and *A* in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982); and Kaufmann's and R. J. Hollingdale's translation of *WP* (1967).

3. Owen, *Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality,"* 113.

4. It should always be kept in mind that the German term for “science” (*Wissenschaft*) is wider than our sense of natural science; it includes all scholarly disciplines.

5. See Conway, *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals,"* especially 137ff., 143–53, 147.

6. Owen, *Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality,"* 127.

7. Conway, *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals,"* 141–42.

8. Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 254–67.

9. Owen, *Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality,"* 38–39.

10. See especially Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

11. See Owen, *Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality,"* 30, 128–30, 134, 151–52.

12. See Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 26–64, 223–44, 242ff., 261, 244, 231.

13. The following remarks are drawn from Louise H. Pratt, *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 11–53.

14. See *Theogony* 27–28 in *Hesiod*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

15. See Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8.487ff. and 19.203, for example.

16. See Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 142–83.

17. Homer, *Odyssey*, 14.122–27; Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey*, 179–83.