Nietzsche, and the Significance of Historical Philosophizing
– On the Use of History for Philosophical Matters

Jacob Gustavsson

Supervisor: András Szigeti
Examiner: Martin Berzell
Abstract

This thesis explores Friedrich Nietzsche’s use of history for philosophical purposes, focusing on two central themes in Nietzsche’s writings: the genealogical methodology, and perspectival epistemology. My aim is to demonstrate how Nietzsche’s concept of “historical philosophizing” is intricately connected to his moral philosophy. Using a genealogical methodology, Nietzsche traces the historical development of moral concepts back to their foundations, unveiling the underlying power structures and complex mechanisms that underpin moral discourse. Additionally, perspectival epistemology challenges conventional notions of truth and objectivity, serving as a critique of moral semantics. I argue that these elements are interconnected and should be studied as parts of a unified whole. By providing insights into an overlooked theme in Nietzschean methodology, this essay may enrich our understanding of his philosophy as well as contribute to broader debates within contemporary philosophy.
Glossary

For convenience, I will use the following acronyms when citing Nietzsche’s works. I follow the guidelines given by The Journal of Nietzsche Studies. When referring to a specific work, I shall use the full title only the first time, followed by the acronym. After this, I will only refer to the work by its acronym. The following list include the works of Nietzsche which have been used for the purpose of this essay.

A  The Anti-Christ
BGE  Beyond Good and Evil
EH  Ecce Homo
GM  On the Genealogy of Morals
GS  The Gay Science
HH  Human, All Too Human
HL  On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life
PTAG  Philosophy in the Tragic age of the Greeks
WP  The Will to Power
TI  Twilight of the Idols: How to Philosophize with a Hammer
TL  On Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense
1. Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the philosophical implications of Nietzsche’s use of history for philosophical matters. While various aspects of this have been acknowledged and studied by philosophers after Nietzsche, the explicit connection between his theoretical commitment to history culminating in his practical philosophy remains somewhat underresearched. Granted, most Nietzsche scholars would agree that he has a clear methodological stance, namely naturalism\(^1\), but the focus is less on his “historical philosophizing” than it is on other parts.\(^2\) In this thesis, I agree with the naturalistic starting point, but I intend to show how Nietzsche’s historical philosophy goes beyond this. It should be noted, however, that I am less concerned with internal discussions regarding methodological approaches than the actual implication of Nietzsche’s historical philosophy.

1.1. Structure

This thesis is divided into two large parts. The first part deals with the theoretical background to what Nietzsche called “historical philosophizing”.\(^3\) There are several important points here to discuss. One point regards the context in which Nietzsche wrote. In chapter 2, “Background”, I explore that context by looking at his contemporary philosophical rivals and how he sought to distance from as well as align himself with certain aspects of their philosophies. Nietzsche’s acknowledgment of the importance of history for philosophical purposes emerges, partly from his educational background, and partly from his antagonistic stance towards certain philosophical traditions. Here, I also give a brief introduction to the literature regarding the above-mentioned methodological view, naturalism, which is distinguished from “meta-ethical naturalism”. In chapter 3 “Explaining the need for a Historical Philosophy for Moral Matters” I briefly demonstrate how Nietzsche’s descriptive as well as normative moral philosophy are deeply connected to his use of history. Crucially, I

---

\(^1\) This is not to be confused with metaethical naturalism, which Nietzsche certainly did not endorse. Metaethical naturalism is a version of moral realism which Nietzsche should certainly not be associated with. I explore such themes in this essay, but for those interested in a more thorough debate, there is a great bit of interpretative disagreement regarding Nietzsche’s metaethical position. Examples of attempts to categorize him include Constructivism as defended by A. Silk (2015, 2018). Realism by T.Lambert (2019). The possibility that Nietzsche did not have a clear stance is explored by Hussain (2013). Hassan explores a cognitivist interpretation (2021), Manuel Knoll argues in favor of perspectivism as a skeptical meta-ethical position (2021). Charles. R. Pigden defends his own and Nietzsche’s (2007), Clark and Dudrick defends non-cognitivism (2007).


\(^3\) Nietzsche explains the term most thoroughly in Human-all-too-Human.
discuss how some of Nietzsche’s most important works serve as both practical examples of as well as theoretical background to his historical philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the subsequent discussions.

The second, more substantive part, deals with Nietzsche’s practical philosophy. In chapter 4 through 5, I show how theory is put into practice through certain acclaimed philosophical methods. The most prominent example is Nietzsche’s genealogical methodology, most maturely instantiated in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM). However, equally important is his ‘perspectivism’ which serves as a combination of a theoretical commitment as well as that commitment put into action. Here, I also discuss the implications of perspectivism of the idea of moral change and moral progress. Finally, I conclude the thesis by drawing conclusions based on the discussions put forth in the essay. I argue that Nietzsche’s historical philosophy is an underappreciated way of doing moral philosophy, and I hope to be able to convey its relevance.

1.2. Methodology

I will also say a few words on my methodological approach in this thesis. As this thesis concerns the outcome of Nietzsche’s philosophy, I consider it important to make exegetical remarks and to supplement them with secondary literature when necessary. Most frequently when developing my arguments, I begin with what Nietzsche himself wrote. Subsequently, I will also look at what others, both defenders and opponents, have written on the same subject. This is especially necessary when one deals with Nietzsche, as there are constantly new interpretations being put forward.\(^4\) I share as well as disagree with many of Nietzsche’s arguments, and I will highlight those I consider to be most important. Thus, it is not just from a scholarly point of view which I consider this topic to be relevant, I also believe that his arguments bear on contemporary discussions. At times, it might prove difficult to distinguish between what Nietzsche said, what the implications of his thoughts are, and what my own opinion about these two are, but I will do my best to present what Nietzsche thought and what I think as two separate things.

\(^4\) If we look at the interpretations of Nietzsche historically, a lot of hard work has been done into refuting the misplaced association he had with the Nazi party. As the renowned Nietzsche translator and commentator Kaufmann remarked numerous times, it was his sister and her husband who smudged Nietzsche’s reputation by being Nazi-sympathizers. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (2013). First Princeton Classics.
Another point is that while Nietzsche’s genealogical method as well as his posthumously ascribed ‘perspectivism’ has been studied and acknowledged to a great extent, there are few comprehensive studies of Nietzsche’s “philosophy of history” (to which historical philosophizing belongs) in Nietzschean scholarship. I mention this because Nietzsche’s historical philosophy is a product of his philosophy of history, and by studying the latter we may also gain knowledge of the former. One reason for this oversight could be that Nietzsche’s views on history are constituted in such a way as to make it impossible for it to be called a rigorous philosophy of history. Another reason could also be that Nietzsche was in fact hostile towards overly relying on theory for philosophical purposes. In short, it is not an easy task to pin down Nietzsche’s theoretical commitments. For instance, Carl E. Pletsch (1977) wrote that “[a]lthough Friedrich Nietzsche concerned himself with history throughout his life, he did not develop a theory of history.” However, does that mean that he did not have a philosophy of history? Certainly not, if we are to believe Anthony K. Jensen, who offered a great contribution in his deep study *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of History* (2013). In this book he gives a comprehensive account of how Nietzsche’s philosophy is rooted in his historical mode of thinking. Jensen opens with the words that “[a] comprehensive exposition of Nietzsche’s philosophy of history has never been attempted.” Other Nietzsche scholars have come to value Jensen’s study as shedding light on a hitherto neglected field of research. However, while Jensen’s book is a major contribution to this topic, I do not follow the same road that he takes. This thesis focuses primarily on the moral implications of Nietzsche’s philosophy of history rather than trying to give another scholarly interpretation of Nietzsche’s “theory”.

Besides Jensen’s study and occasional articles published by acknowledged Nietzsche scholars, there will be references to philosophers who have in some way or another shared the same theoretical commitment as Nietzsche did. Such thinkers include Bernard Williams, G.E.M Anscombe, Michel Foucault, as well as contemporary philosophers such as Matthieu Queloz. The point of mentioning them is to show the importance of this topic and bolster my case.

---

5 Indeed, Kaufmann (2013), Chapter 2, argues that Nietzsche was an anti-systematic thinker who did not have a “theory”.
8 See; Andrew Jampol-Petzinger (2015), Mason Golden (2015),
1.3. Defining Historical Philosophizing?

As is usual when one is dealing with Nietzsche, one is never given clear cut instructions on how to approach him. When discussing the meaning of historical philosophizing, he abstains from telling us the precise nature of the idea and a clear definition is not ever provided. Rather than to provide a clear definition, this essay is an attempt to spell it out in practical terms. I intend to show rather than construct how historical philosophizing can be instantiated. According to my understanding, the crux of this methodology is the symbiotic relationship between philosophy and history. Therefore, it also functions as a critique of those philosophers and philosophies that fail to acknowledge the aforementioned insight. A final thing to note is that while Nietzsche preached history for philosophical use, there are ways in which history may be used for disadvantageous purposes. History may be glorified or condemned and both ways may be right and wrong. If history is condemned, then it usually follows that the present is inherently superior. If history is glorified, then the present is equally condemned as being a mere reflection of a more glorious time. Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing is neither, but it can be both. What all of this means will be elaborated further on in this essay. Especially relevant is the discussion given in chapter 2.
2. Background

In the following sections, I provide a background to how Nietzsche’s particular methodology arises, why it is important for him, and what type of philosopher he distances himself from. Nietzsche was not unique in using history for philosophical matters. Both before his time and after, this has been recognized to some extent. The key difference is how history is used and incorporated into philosophy. This chapter is intended to show how Nietzsche’s peculiar connection between history and philosophy arises from his opposition to contemporary and past thinkers, and to provide an introduction to his general philosophical methodology.

2.1. The Roots of Historical Philosophizing

Nietzsche lived and wrote in a time and place where history as an academic enterprise blossomed. Jensen (2013) calls it the “historical century”.

In such a setting, it was natural for Nietzsche to be inspired as well as oppose some of his contemporaries and predecessors - and in some cases, both. It is on this point we shall elaborate further. Returning to the question as to why a need for an historical explanation is “necessary”, we may turn to what exactly Nietzsche sought to oppose. As we will see, historical explanations for philosophical purposes came in many different shapes and forms. We shall consider a few of them in this chapter. Let us start with a quote from one of Nietzsche’s earlier works, On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life (HL):

I believe that there has been no dangerous variation or change in German culture in this century which has not become more dangerous through the monstrous influence of the philosophy of Hegel, an influence which continues to flow right up to the present. The belief that one is a late comer of the age is truly crippling and disorienting; but it must appear fearful and destructive when such a belief one day with a bold reversal idolizes this late comer as the true meaning and purpose of all earlier events, when his knowledgeable misery is equated to the completion of world history. Such a way of considering things has made the Germans accustomed to talking of the “World Process” and to justify their own time as the necessary result of the world process. Such a way of thinking about things has

---

10 Here I refer to the case of both Schopenhauer and Wagner. Both of these came to have great inspiration for Nietzsche in the early years of his career. However, in later Nietzsche, we see a clear demarcation against both of them. He renounced Wagner because of the Christianisation of his later works, and Schopenhauer because of his insistence upon life as the ultimate evil and sympathy as the ultimate good.
made history the single sovereign, in the place of the other spiritual powers, culture and religion, insofar as history is “the self realizing idea” and “the dialectic of the spirits of peoples” and the “last judgment.”

This is a great starting point that illustrates different themes which will be of relevance here. Nietzsche’s point in this lengthy passage is that the moral imperative which we operate under is rendered blurry by the idea of a “final stage” or, to speak in a more modern lingo, an “end of history”. However, while Nietzsche uses history for philosophical purposes, this passage also shows the dangers of trusting too much in history. He notes how the idea of an historical world process has “made history the single sovereign…” indicating that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing historical philosophizing. The wrong way, put shortly, consists in having an attitude towards historical development as necessarily progressive; history is, according to this point of view, incorporated as the “proof” for the superiority of our current perspective.

While Nietzsche may be criticized for being inconsistent throughout his writings, one point which is persistently clear. When speaking of “progress”, we invoke a certain human aspect which seems to be fundamental to all - we claim superiority to that which came before us on the merit of time. This tendency seems almost hardwired. Besides the psychological mechanism at play here, language might also be playing a trick on us. In Nietzsche’s short essay, On Truth and Lies in a Extra-moral Sense (TL), he discusses the idea that words are structured as to indicate a true or false statement, but any word can be reinterpreted and recreated in order to create a new true or false statement. He writes: “truths are illusions which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.” Perhaps it is such an illusion that moral progress and time are related, as if they were casually connected. Indeed, this is a discussion which can be found in the Will to Power

---

12 A reference to the modern scholar Francis Fukuyama, who wrote a greatly successful but equally controversial article (and later book), The End of History and the Last Man, where he argued that liberalism as a political doctrine was the endpoint of political development. This is a great book indeed, but for a number of reasons, I strongly disagree with Fukuyama’s conclusions.
13 The modern philosopher Michele Moody-Adams also makes this point in her essay Moral Progress and Human Agency, where she writes: “The idea of moral progress is a necessary presupposition of action for beings like us. We must believe that moral progress is possible and that it might have been realized in human experience, if we are to be confident that continued human action can have any morally constructive point.” Moody-Adams, Michele M. “Moral Progress and Human Agency.” Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 20, no. 1 (2017): 153–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44955493.
(WP): “Progress.— Let us not be deceived! Time marches forward; we’d like to believe that everything that is in it also marches forward - that the development is one that moves forward.”

Let us now consider what Hegel, one of the most important 19th century philosophers, thought on the same matter. In a lecture on the history of philosophy, Hegel proclaimed: “philosophy aims at understanding what is unchangeable, eternal, in and for itself; its end is truth.” And also: Truth is eternal; it does not fall within the sphere of the transient, and has no history. Such a quote could not be further away from Nietzsche’s point of view. For Hegel then, truth is thus eternal, objective, and unchangeable, but for Nietzsche, as we will see, and as is evident by the quote from TL, ‘truth’ is a slippery concept which possesses no metaphysical status on its own. This is a topic which we shall return to at greater length in section 5, when we discuss perspectivism and epistemology.

Furthermore, in one of Nietzsche’s final works, The Twilight of Idols (TI), he reiterates the point that when we think of ourselves as the culmination of historical progress we are not unique because “every age thinks in this way, has to think in this way.” If we take Nietzsche’s judgment to be sound, then it should give rise to a skepticism of our own ‘unique’ position in the world. If everyone is bound to think this way, and everyone claims their own moral superiority, how do we sort out which ones are right and which ones are wrong? This is the sort of epistemological skepticism which gives rise to perspectivism. This does not, however, lead to the conclusion that all things are equal and we cannot assert normative about which one’s are “better” or “worse”. This is a sort of moral relativism which Nietzsche can be associated with, but as I will argue later on, Nietzsche ranks moralities in the order to which they serve life; and this means that some are harmful and others beneficial.

There is also another key difference between the Hegelian tradition and the Nietzschean point of opposition. While Hegel started off by studying history empirically, his conclusions and generalizations are largely speculative. Here, we can benefit from a distinction made by W.H. Walsh (1971) between critical and speculative philosophy of

---

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power. Translated by Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Holingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann 1968. New York Random House, Inc. Book one section 90, italics added. It should be noted that WP is a notoriously controversial work in Nietzschean literature. This is so because he did not write it himself. It is a collection of notes made by his sister after Nietzsche’s death. However, I believe that these notes are extremely insightful and that it is foolish to dismiss these simply because his sister has a bad reputation.
17 Ibid.
history. According to Walsh, the former is a “philosophical inquiry into history considered as the scientific discovery and explanation of past human actions - that is, into “historiography…” Speculative philosophy of history (which he also calls metaphysical philosophy of history), he says, endeavors to determine the meaning and purpose of history considered as the totality of past human actions.” This quote is of great importance for illuminating the project which Nietzsche turns to, and the one which he opposes. Nietzsche would not “endeavor to determine the meaning and purpose of history considered as totality of past human actions”, rather, he will inquire into history critically with the purpose of showing that history is precisely that which is not the totality of past human actions. Hegel per se is not important to ponder on further, but rather that which he stands for and what sort of philosophy he represented. Hegel was not unique, of course, in postulating a metaphysical philosophy of history. The same may be said for Christian philosophy of history, which too involves something universal, objective and milleniaristic - the latter referring to the total transformation of society and its values when Christ returns. In contrast, Nietzsche strived for the particulars, not the universals. He searched for a multitude of perspectives rather than one fundamental truth. This is a topic which shall be further discussed in chapter 5.

However, it must be said that Nietzsche does not represent the polar opposite of a speculative philosopher of history. Nietzsche searched for more truthful explanations, but his conclusions are often based on his own speculations. As we will see when analyzing GM, much of what Nietzsche says about history is the product of a psychological interpretation of historical events. While Nietzsche was a very talented philologist by training, he diverged from the “objective” and “gray” philologist. The methodology which 19th century German philologists employed were either labeled as Sprachphilologen or Sachphilologen. The former, to which Nietzsche belonged, referred to those stressing the need for linguistic analysis, certainty, and the “tearing down of speculative fancies”. The latter relied equally much on their own capability to interpret historical phenomena as much as empirical data. That Nietzsche belonged to the Sprachphilologen (language philologists) was evident when

---

20 Ibid.
21 Although this is true, you can make the argument that Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power is a universal claim. In early Nietzsche, the will to power is yet a hypothesis, a thought-experiment which may or may not be true. In later Nietzsche, from BGE onwards, he seems convinced that the will to power actually might be universally applicable. Either case, it does present somewhat of a dilemma for his seeming denial of universal explanations.
his use of etymological research led him to extract philosophical arguments. I will show how this was done in practice in sections 4.2 - 4.4.

2.2. Methodology, Naturalism, and Meta-ethical Considerations

As this essay concerns Nietzsche’s methodology, it is also fitting to mention a popular interpretation of his methodology. One of the most common interpretations of Nietzsche is that he was a “naturalist”, or more specifically, a “methodological naturalist”. Before elaborating further on this, I want to make a crucial point that there is a key difference between Nietzsche’s methodological naturalism and meta-ethical naturalism. This is a relevant distinction. It must be pointed out that if Nietzsche were to be grouped together with meta-ethical naturalists, then that would be a misinterpretation. Nietzsche and his corresponding metaethics has been described by some as anti-realist while meta-ethical naturalism is a subcategory of moral realism. Those who adhere to meta-ethical naturalism believe, according to Lane DesAutels (2023), that “goodness and badness are just as much a part of the furniture of the world as properties like mass, charge, and spin. Characterized as such, meta-ethical naturalism is a subversion of moral realism: the view that there are objective, mind-independent moral facts. It adds to this view that these moral facts are natural facts and are thus the appropriate target for scientific investigation.” Nietzsche would not disagree with the first part of the quote. He too believed that good and bad were part of this world (rather than in some platonic heaven), but he would disagree that good and bad simply are “out there”, waiting to be grasped. Thus, he rejects the view that there exists objective and mind-independent moral facts.

Even though Nietzsche should not be grouped together with meta-ethical naturalists, there nevertheless exists a link between Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing and his ascribed metaethics. Unfortunately, establishing this explicitly falls beyond the scope of this essay.

---

23 There is an alternative interpretation which states that he did not have a method at all. Kaufmann (2013) stresses the point again and again that Nietzsche does not have a “system”. While this may be true to some extent (Nietzsche writes in TW part 1 section 26 that “I distrust all systematizers and stay out of their way. The will to a system is a lack of integrity”), there are of course certain commitments which Nietzsche subscribes to which can be argued thus constituting a sort of system, or methodological approach.


25 Alex Silk (2013) has described Nietzsche’s metaethics as an “apparent antirealism” while interpreting him as a metaethical constructivist. Alex Silk (2015) Nietzschean Constructivism: Ethics and Metaethics for All and None, Inquiry, 58.3, 244-280, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2013.878666

will briefly note how such a connection can be made. To illustrate this, we may consider the following questions. What gives rise to moral judgments and moral convictions? What is the status of truth in morality? Does truth exist and how are truth and falsity usually depicted? What are people actually saying when they assert that something is ‘good’ or ‘bad’? All such questions are Nietzschean, and all of them are central to metaethics. Accordingly, a reader who is involved in metaethics may use the insights given in this essay as food for thought.  

Returning to Nietzsche’s ‘methodological naturalism’, we may note that what is key is that he interprets nature as being value-free. In The Gay Science (GS) he writes: “Whatever has value in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature - nature is always value-less - but has rather been given, granted value, and we were the givers and granters!” The key point is that nature is initially value-free, and is constantly being reshaped and redefined according to our creative and constructive will. Paradoxically, we can say that nature is valuable precisely because it is value-free, since it enables us to create our own values - because it does not command but obeys to our commands; we impose ourselves on nature as such and fill it with values which are ours. Values, according to this reasoning, are not intrinsic to nature. Nietzsche writes in AC that “We no longer trace the origin of man in the ‘spirit’, in the ‘divinity’, we have placed him back among the animals.”

In GM, Nietzsche aims to put morality at the forefront of nature without alluding to supernatural or metaphysical explanations. To put morality back into nature is to stand in a “correct, that is to say natural relationship to things.” Thus, the relation between history, morality, and nature is intertwined. To put morality back into nature is also to inquire into the “real origin of things”, as he says in GM. Where do our values come from? Are they natural? God-given? Invented? As Nietzsche wants to argue, values cannot be cannot be entirely natural since nature is “value-free”. Nor can it be since god-given since “god is dead”.

There remains but one option: values were at some point invented, and if they were invented they must have a history; an origin.

---

27 Metaethical questions go back to ancient Greece, where Socrates in Plato’s Euthyphro asked a fundamental question when inquiring into the origin of values - the Euthyphro problem: “The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.” This is a classic example of a metaethical question because it poses questions about the nature of values, rather than taking them for granted. Cited from Gutenberg.org, translated by Benjamin Jowett, produced by Sue Asscher and David Widger (2013).
30 Ibid., section 25
31 Nietzsche (2001) section 125.
3. Explaining the need of a Historical Philosophy for Moral Matters

In this section, I provide a theoretical background to the practical philosophy that will be subsequently explored. Specifically, I show how different works of Nietzsche exemplify this and why the need for a historical philosophy for moral matters is necessary.

The central message of Nietzsche’s historical philosophy is that morality necessitates a more nuanced approach; in order to comprehend the present one must also comprehend the past. Nietzsche viewed past philosophers as both unhistorical and fixated with timeless truths. This had tremendous consequences for their philosophies. One passage from *III* is of particular importance in this regard. I will cite it at length:

All philosophers have the common fault that they start from man in his present state and hope to attain their end by an analysis of him. Unconsciously they look upon “man” as an *aeterna veritas*, as a thing unchangeable in all commotion, as a sure standard of things (...) A lack of the historical sense is the hereditary fault of all philosophers; many, indeed, unconsciously mistake the very latest variety of man, such as has arisen under the influence of certain religions, certain political events, for the permanent form from which one must set out.\(^{32}\)

The philosopher who analyzes man as an “*aeterna veritas*” fails to recognize the importance of an historical outlook for moral matters. There is also a deeper meaning here to be found besides the reliance on history. Nietzsche stresses the point that studying morality is a complex matter which requires a multitude of possible routes. When making a moral judgment, Nietzsche urges us to inquire deeper into what is actually motivating us to make such a judgment. What is right? What is wrong? Are such answers determined by instinct? Reason? Objective truth? How can one know for sure? Perhaps, morality throughout history has been determined on grounds that lack sufficient justification. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*), Nietzsche posits an interesting hypothesis regarding the history of moral sentiments. Although this hypothesis is contradictory to what would later be stated in *GM*, it does provide food for thought. I will comment on section 32 of *BGE* in order to show how Nietzsche exemplifies this.

Nietzsche suggests that in the most ancient times, or “prehistory”, good and bad actions were determined solely by virtue of their consequences. Nietzsche would call this epoch the “premoral age”, indicating a primitive state of affairs where man had not yet

\(^{32}\) Nietzsche (1910), book 1, section 2.
learned true self-reflection and had not gained self-consciousness. However, as time progressed, a monumental shift occurred in the affairs of man. Man entered the “moral period”, where moral actions gained their virtue by the intention of the action rather than on the merit of consequences. Morality as intentionality has been the dominant moral paradigm extending into our day and age, gaining strength from doctrines such as Christianity and Kantian ethics. Lastly, Nietzsche calls for another perspectival reversal: the extra moral period, where intentionality no longer serves as indicative as moral. Instead, intentionality is reduced to a sign, or a symptom of an action that needs to be interpreted. Nietzsche calls us to “overcome” morality as intentionality. He says “The decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is unintentional in it”.

In my interpretation, the purpose of Nietzsche’s hypothesis is to propose the idea that moral evaluations operate within dominant paradigms, where one paradigm gains dominance through power instead of truthfulness. Of course, the dominant paradigm may pose as heralding their particular morality as the truth, but truth in such matters are, according to Nietzsche, perspectival. It is also noteworthy here that Nietzsche does not say anything about the progression of morality in this hypothesis. He simply stated that one dominant perspective overcame and replaced the other. When the shift from the premoral to the moral period happened it was a tremendous event. Nietzsche says: “what a reversal of perspective! And, certainly, this reversal was only accomplished after long struggles and fluctuations! Granted: this meant that a disastrous new superstition, a distinctive narrowness of interpretation, gained dominance.” This quote is intriguing since Nietzsche’s choice of words are not arbitrarily chosen but remain important in their own right. A moral perspective in any historical period is, according to Nietzsche’s own words, a superstition and an interpretation which may or may not gain dominance. Any moral perspective which has gained dominance throughout history believes that it has, as Lampert (2001) writes, “gained the right to praise, blame, judge, and even philosophize everything on earth.”

Returning to the question of how we inquire into the roots of morality, Nietzsche’s point is not only directed towards philosophers studying morality in general terms. The

35 Nietzsche never used the word paradigm. This is my interpretation of it. There are similarities between what Nietzsche would characterize as a moral paradigm and what Kuhn later would describe as a scientific paradigm.
36 This will be elaborated further on in section 5.
37 Ibid.
38 Laurence Lampert: Nietzsche’s Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil, Yale University Press, 2001 p. 76.
argument is equally - if not more - focused on individuals as well. He wants individuals to investigate their own history as philosophers must investigate the history of cultures and peoples to understand the motives of their moral judgments. Nietzsche writes in the brilliant section 335 of GS: “Your judgement, 'that is right' has a prehistory in your drives, inclinations, aversions, experiences, and what you have failed to experience; you have to ask, 'how did it emerge there?' and then also, 'what is really impelling me to listen to it?'”

Hence, the drives and motives of a particular moral system is a byproduct of a specific development, just as the individual’s own particular valuations are a byproduct of his inner state of affairs. In BGE, Nietzsche makes the claim that there is a tendency for human beings to habituate moral valuations to the point of them seeming to be “good in themselves.” And in GS, he writes that there is a huge difference between what is actually the case and what we believe to be the case, he writes: “that you feel something to be right may have its cause in your never having thought much about yourself and in your blindly having accepted what has been labeled right since your childhood”. For instance, why are modern virtues such as sympathy or altruism praised? Or to take an even more controversial one (and indeed Nietzschean in style): why do we value truth above all else? Is it because these virtues possess some intrinsic value which we “know” are intuitively good? Or are they considered valuable because the opposing value has never been thought of as anything but inherently “bad”, and that we have come to accept these as true simply because they are rooted in our cultural history. Such questions are precisely what Nietzsche’s historical philosophy aims at - to discover the true origin of values and to question our moral intuitions. To reiterate Nietzsche puzzling point in TL: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.”

One insight which can be extrapolated from Nietzsche’s writings regards the psychological mechanisms that come with an ahistorical outlook on life. Many of the things we take to be true are never truly examined, but remain blindly accepted. However, and this is important even though it may come as a surprise, there is such a thing as “too much history”. In HL Nietzsche also considers forgetfulness, and perhaps even ignorance a virtue

---

39 GS 335 is important in many different ways. It touches on Nietzsche vs Kant, on the importance of honesty towards oneself, on universal morality vs individual morality, on selfishness and self-knowledge, and on conscience. An absolutely brilliant section all in all.
40 Part 1 of BGE goes into great depth regarding this issue.
too. He says: there is a degree of [historical sense] that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture.\textsuperscript{43} This might sound surprising, given that we have just argued heavily in favor of a historical outlook, but the point is that there must be a balance between the historical and the \textit{unhistorical}. The idealizer of history will lead himself into the Hegelian trapfall which sees the future as entirely premised on history itself. Such an individual “believes that the meaning of existence will become clearer in its evolution.”\textsuperscript{44} This, for Nietzsche, is a nihilistic outlook on life. History must \textit{serve} life, and it serves it best through what he calls “critical history” - that is: less idealizing, more scrutinizing.

Nietzsche’s call for the need of a historical philosophy will become more clear once put into practice. In the following sections I will analyze two of Nietzsche’s most famous philosophies, the genealogical method and perspectivism.

\textsuperscript{43} Nietzsche (2009). Section 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Nietzsche (2019). Section 1.
4. Historical Philosophizing in *On the Genealogy of Morals*

It is the same with the saying that, in order to understand history, *we must scrutinise the living remains of historical periods*; that we must travel, as old Herodotus travelled, to other nations, especially to those so-called savage or half-savage races in regions where man has doffed or not yet donned European garb.”

Having dealt extensively with the theoretical foundation of historical philosophizing, this chapter examines theory turned into practice. In the first section, I demonstrate its philosophical relevance and how it has influenced subsequent generations of thinkers. In the second section I explain the concept of Nietzsche’s genealogy and what exactly it amounts to. Lastly, I offer Nietzsche’s own account of historical philosophizing put into practice.

### 4.1. Influence and aftermath

That I begin the part on the genealogical method by showing its subsequent reception might seem as a bottom-up strategy. However, it might be easier for us to relate to Nietzsche’s own words if we have a sense of what these words have meant for thinkers who came after him. By considering their account we might be able to see the relevance of Nietzsche’s philosophical contribution much clearer.

The significance of an inquiry into the origin of values through the use of history has been clear for many writers succeeding Nietzsche. One prominent example is Bernard Williams, who in *Shame and Necessity* (1993) analyzed the value-system of Greek antiquity in an philosophical-historical approach which for him meant “a philosophical description of an historical reality.” He writes, for instance, that “the modern world was a European creation presided over by the Greek past.” And that studying our past helps us to “understand how our ideas are related to the Greeks’ because, if we do so, this can especially help us to see ways in which our ideas may be wrong.” This incentive for why one ought to study history is quite interesting. Williams' explanation does not idealize the present at the expense of the past, but upholds a skeptical attitude. It is perhaps common to think that we

---

47 *Ibid*
study history in order to see how we are right, i.e., how far we have come and how much we have progressed. This attitude is opposed by a stance of healthy skepticism. Williams is especially (and so was Nietzsche) hostile towards what he calls the “progressivist” thesis. The progressivist thesis is an extension of the Hegelian philosophy of history mentioned earlier in the essay. According to Williams, many modern authors hold the view that previous cultures had “primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience.”

Instead, Williams wants to argue that the amount of progress which the progressivists claim has been achieved is not a total revaluation of ideas and conceptions, but that maintain many of the same basic tenets.

The point of bringing up William’s study of ancient Greece is to highlight Nietzsche’s influence and to show how William's uses the same methodological approach. Perhaps the most famous account of this is to be found in Nietzsche’s GM, but also in his all but unknown (or less studied) Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks (PTAG), published long before GM. In this, he writes: “So much depends on the development of Greek culture because our entire occidental world has received its initial stimuli from it.”

Indeed, when the culture of Ancient Greece perished, Nietzsche felt that “Indescribable riches were lost to us.” Nietzsche and Williams thus both share the idea that we should study that particular history in order to gain valuable insights about the value of values. Nietzsche writes: “We ought to be learning from our neighbors precisely as the Greeks learned from theirs, not for the sake of learned pedantery but rather using everything we learn as a foothold which will take us up as high, and higher than our neighbor.”

Here, neighbors refer not only to contemporary peoples, but peoples of all ages. Crucially, seen from a philosophical perspective studying the nature of morality, history is incorporated as another means for reaching valuable insights.

Besides the insights into moral philosophy, Nietzsche’s contribution to moral psychology has also been great. An example of a notable thinker who adopted the same psychological approach as Nietzsche did was G.E.M. Anscombe, who in her polemic writing Modern Moral Philosophy (1958) posited three theses regarding the state of modern moral philosophy, where the two first theses are heavily inspired by Nietzsche. Anscombe’s first point is that it is not profitable doing moral philosophy without “an adequate philosophy of

---

50 Actually, this is an unpublished work, but the date of its writing goes back 15 years or so prior to GM.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking."\textsuperscript{54} This echoes Nietzsche because he too stresses the point, again and again, that we need a psychological study of morality as much as we need a philosophical study of it. He writes in \textit{BGE} that "All psychology so far has been stuck in moral prejudices and fears: it has not ventured into the depths. To grasp psychology as morphology and the doctrine of the development of the will to power".\textsuperscript{55,56} In the same section, he also writes that psychology ought to be "recognized as the queen of sciences, and that the rest of the sciences exist to serve and prepare for it."\textsuperscript{57}

Returning to Anscombe, the second thesis of her paper states that moral concepts such as 'duty', 'obligation', 'ought', 'right and wrong', must be abandoned and overcome because "they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer survives, and are only harmful without it."\textsuperscript{58} In a similar fashion, Nietzsche claims that the psychological mechanisms underlying moral convictions are remnants of a past to which our contemporary connection has been severed. Granted, modernity is a result of a historical development which would be impossible without Christianity, but if God is dead, and we have abandoned our faith in Christian morality, how is it that we still cling to inherently Christian concepts? Furthermore, should we abandon them since they are contextually confused? Perhaps surprisingly, Nietzsche says no. The reason is, as Nietzsche writes, that "[t]he inquiry into the origin of our evaluations and tables of the good is in absolutely no way identical with a critique of them, as is so often believed."\textsuperscript{59} The discovery of a thing is not equivalent to a critique of said thing. To offer a critique requires an articulation of the problem at hand. This is what Nietzsche serves in \textit{GM}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Nietzsche (2002) section 23
\item \textsuperscript{56} It is quite possible that Nietzsche derived the term ‘morphology’ from Schopenhauer. For instance, in Schopenhauer’s magnum opus \textit{The World as Will and Representation}, he writes that ‘Morphology is what we call natural history in its whole range.’ \textit{The World as Will and Representation}. Translation by E.F.J. Payne. Dover Publications, Inc 1957. Book 2 section 17.
\item \textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Anscombe (1958).
\item \textsuperscript{59} Nietzsche (1968) book 2, section 254.
\end{itemize}
4.2. Genealogy as Historical Philosophizing.

It is noteworthy that Nietzsche was not the first one to offer a genealogical inquiry into the development of moral sentiments. Indeed, he was not even truly original. Nietzsche’s idea of a genealogical originates from his erstwhile friend and colleague Paul Rée. In 1877, a decade prior to Nietzsche’s GM, Rée wrote On the Origins of Moral Sentiments, describing the history of morality from a utilitarian perspective. There are great similarities between Nietzsche and Rée’s writings, as well as polemics from Nietzsche’s side. Rée claimed that moral judgments were originally praised on the basis of good and bad consequences, or utility. Crucially, Nietzsche credits Rée and other “British psychologists" for starting an inquiry into the history of morality but he distanced himself from their sought explanations. Nietzsche wrote in GM that “Now it is plain to me, first of all, that in this theory the source of the concept "good" has been sought and established in the wrong place: the judgment "good" did not originate with those to whom "goodness" was shown! Rather it was "the good" themselves, that is to say, the noble, 'powerful, high-stationed and highminded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to the low, low-minded, common and plebeian. It was out of this pathos of distance that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values: what had they to do with utility!"  

I will elucidate the significance of this passage as we continue; however, it is noteworthy as it indicates how two similar inquiries into the same topic produced two entirely different perspectives on morality.

Hence, although Nietzsche’s genealogical account has somewhat of a reputation, it is not inherently unique. Jesse Prinz (2016) has contrasted Nietzsche’s genealogy with the utilitarian perspective as well as a marxist genealogy. I will highlight the key insight from Prinz’s article as he delineates the distinctions in Nietzsche’s genealogical method compared to others, and why it does a better job at explaining what it seeks to explain. For our purposes, I will leave aside the marxist tradition and instead focus on the asymmetry between the Utilitarian and the Nietzschean perspective.

The utilitarian genealogy primarily concerns Nietzsche’s former friend and colleague Paul Rée, who, even though he was German, adopted a utilitarian (or British) point of view. Although Nietzsche distanced himself from Rée, it is clear that the relationship was of tremendous importance - perhaps more important than Nietzsche would ever admit. For

---

60 Nietzsche (1989) essay 1 section 2
instance, Donnellan (1982) points out that “Nietzsche discerns an historical development of moral feelings which is identical, point to point, with Réé’s.”⁶² This is true, but only true up until the writings of GM. In the writings preceding GM, Nietzsche shares the sentiment that consequences determine good and bad rather than it being a product of a “pathos of distance morality” (of which I will explain the meaning of later). From an exegetical standpoint, I contend that GM is the most sophisticated instantiation of Nietzsche’s genealogy, and that we should trust this account if we want the full version.

One key insight of Prinz article is also that we can trace back the Utilitarian history back to Hobbes, where Hobbes creates a narrative of how morality saved us from committing heinous crimes against each other in the state of nature. Morality, according to this explanation, has a purely practical aspect: to bring about desirable consequences. Furthermore, besides the utilitarian aspect, Nietzsche despises with equal disregard the universal character of such explanations. Hobbes posits that the state of nature can be extrapolated to any political entity, assuming a uniform set of premises. According to this idea, morality is construed as a contractual relationship between subject and master. Morality is maintained as long as their submission is guaranteed. As has been noted earlier in this essay, any universal explanation is rejected by Nietzsche. Both Hobbes and Réé would agree that utility is a universally valid base for their moral systems. Based on this assumption, they also subdued history into the same explanation, making history seem as an inherently progressive enterprise. Foucault would later write on this topic that “Paul Réé was wrong to follow the English tendency in describing the history of morality in terms of a linear development—in reducing its entire history and genesis to an exclusive concern for utility. He assumed that words had kept their meaning, that desires still pointed in a single direction…”⁶³

Both Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s methodology shares the same basic conception, articulated by one author thus: “The point of a genealogical analysis is to show that a given system of thought was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends.”⁶⁴

Lastly, this leads us to the “Nietzschean genealogy” described by Rahul Chaduhri (2016) is an amalgamation of history and psychology. Although being distinctive in its form,

---


Chadurhi also points out that the distinctiveness is also one of its most “puzzling and problematic features.”\(^65\) Hence, while Nietzschean genealogy is one part history and one part psychology, the point must be stressed that it is not history in the conventional sense. For instance, the definition of a “genealogy” offered by the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy’s reads as follows: “Genealogy is part historical reconstruction of the way certain concepts have come to have the shape they do, and part ‘rational reconstruction’ or story about the function they serve, which may or may not correspond to historical evolution.”\(^66\)

The ambivalence regarding Nietzsche’s historical accuracy may create a bit of a conundrum if we want to show that what he is saying actually has real implications. However, we should emphasize the fact that Nietzsche’s “historical sense” is rather different from his contemporary scholarly colleagues. Rather than claiming objectivity and timelessness as sovereign virtues of historical studies, Nietzsche would embrace the reverse. Jensen (2013) writes that “Nietzsche’s unique accomplishment in the philosophy of history was to simultaneously recognize the developmental character of reality and that his own account of it represents a symbolic way of description, a way that admits the anti-realist, perspectival, and historical character of his historiography [...] Genealogy, as Nietzsche conceives it, is a historically contingent anti-realist representation set within and constructed to convince a specific and determinate type of perspective.”\(^67\)

Furthermore, one should also remember that for Nietzsche, the truth- or falsehood of something is not an objection per se. For Nietzsche, morality is not necessarily objectionable because it is “false” (in some conventional use of the word); rather, it is objectionable because it is harmful. Equally, morality is not praiseworthy because of some intrinsic truth-value; rather, it is “good” if it has a life-enhancing purpose. He writes in BGE that “We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates, the type.”\(^68\)

Nevertheless, a criticism of Nietzsche’s “historical philosophizing” is tangible when one can doubt the historical accuracy. If the philosophy is a result from history itself, and if we deny the credibility of that philosophy being premised on real history, then why should we trust Nietzsche at all? Jensen (2013) poses the similar concern: “Nearly all commentators on


the Genealog[y] recognize the problem of affixing the veracity of Nietzsche’s claims, and offer a variety of strategies for mitigating it.”69 However, and I second Jensen in this, I think that despite legitimate concerns regarding Nietzsche’s historical accuracy (one should recall that he was not a professional historian and the substantial time elapsed since his writings ought to have had an impact on the field of history) we can be rather certain that Nietzsche himself took his historical descriptions to be true. Jensen also shows that Nietzsche used significant research when conducting the project of GM, and given his circle of acquaintances - most notably the great historian Burckhardt - I think it would be foolish to dismiss Nietzsche’s history on the grounds that he was not the ideal historian.70

Despite the standing criticism, there are plenty of scholars subsequent to Nietzsche who have adopted Nietzsche’s genealogy. For instance, Matthew Queloz developed a Nietzschean-inspired “pragmatic genealogy.”71 Queloz, as has been remarked by P.J.E Kail, argues that “concepts or ideas are best approached not by analysis but in terms of their origins, or what it is that might explain why we have the concepts that we do. More precisely, Queloz’s conception of genealogy focuses on the practical origins of ideas.”72 Queloz, inspired both by Nietzsche and Williams, writes that “We did not make the ideas we live by. They are, for the most part, ideas we inherited, unthinkingly growing into patterns of thought cultivated by others, with little sense of why just these ways of seeing, valuing, and reasoning should have gained hold in the first place.”73 As should be rather clear by now, this of course sounds truly Nietzschean. Furthermore, by adopting a “pragmatic approach”, Queloz's aim is to answer the quote given above: to find the roots which make up the ‘ideas we live by’. In sum, “pragmatic genealogy begins by showing how something is somehow worthwhile for someone, even if it then continues as a narrative of loss of functionality.”74 This - taken together with Nietzsche’s practical use of critical history which he discusses in HL - is also what Nietzsche is doing.

In the two following sections, I will show how Nietzsche most effectively employs his ‘historical philosophizing’. While there are fragments of this methodology scattered

69 Jensen (2013) p. 158
70 One must not also forget that Nietzsche was a professor in a world-leading academic culture and a trained philologist. Hence, he was hardly a layman of historical studies.
73 Queloz (2021) chapter 1.
74 Ibid.
throughout all of Nietzsche’s writings, the most complete and comprehensive account is to be found in *GM*. *GM* consists of a total of three essays all of which is concerned with the origins of moral sentiments. I shall focus on the first essay, since I believe that the argument being put forth best suits our purposes. Here is where Nietzsche best uses his psychological historicism in order to extrapolate philosophical insights. I will return to essay two later, leaving aside most of essay three.

4.3. The Need for a Genealogical Inquiry

The preface to *GM* is, in my mind, one of the - if not the - most important parts of the work. It not only establishes the overarching tone for what is to come but also provides small fragments that will crystallize throughout the essay. In this section, I explore the preface as well as complementary writings with the aim of discerning Nietzsche’s own articulation regarding the “need” for a genealogical account of morality.

Nietzsche’s interest in the origins of moral sentiments came from a “fundamental will to knowledge”.75 He wanted to find the true source of things with ever greater precision. Put simply, he searched for the truth or an explanation as close to the truth as possible. This may sound surprising, given that he sometimes seemingly denies the existence of truth altogether. At one occasion he writes “there are no absolute truths.”76 This is an issue we shall return to at greater length when discussing perspectivism and epistemology. For now, it suffices to say that what counts as ‘true’ for Nietzsche in this context, is that he believed that his genealogy had a more truthful approach. Indeed, Nietzsche writes in the preface to *GM* that he did not seek to refute Rée and the utilitarians merely for the sake of refutation; rather, he aimed to enhance their explanations and replace ‘blue’ with ‘gray’. This distinction between blue and gray is, according to Queloz (2021), Nietzsche turning against “unconstrained hypothesizing into the blue; such free roaming of the imagination is to be constrained by looking *towards* real history - *informing* rather than replacing hypothesizing by real history.”77 Thus, what Nietzsche finds lacking is evidence. It is here that he turns to his philological background to

76 Nietzsche (1910) section 2
77 Queloz (2021) p. 128.
support his thesis. “The signpost to the right road was for me the question: what was the real etymological significance of the designations for "good" coined in the various languages?”

Crucially, Nietzsche’s interest in the search for the origins of morality had a major breakthrough when he learned to “separate theological prejudice from moral prejudice and ceased to look for the origin of evil behind the world.” Indeed, Nietzsche outgrew his Christian upbringing through the humanist schooling, which then gave rise to significant questions such as: “under what conditions did man devise these value judgments good and evil? and what value do they themselves possess? Have they hitherto hindered or furthered human prosperity? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or is there revealed in them, on the contrary, the plenitude, force, and will of life, its courage, certainty, future?” This quote is crucial. It sums up much of what Nietzsche’s genealogical method amounts to: showing that morality is a man-made, constructive enterprise, neither absolute nor necessary. To question the value of a value itself leads to a “rendezvous of question and question-marks.”

Nietzsche’s point is that a healthy skepticism towards moral paradigms arises when one begins to ask fundamental questions about their existence. How did this paradigm arise? What did it replace, and is it harmful or beneficial? Indeed, answers to such questions may open up new perspectives that might cause the paradigm to crack. However, this might cause the objection that Nietzsche and the genealogical method leads to a ‘genetic fallacy’ - the idea that Nietzsche’s critique of values is a critique arising directly out of the origin of that value itself. I align with Alexander Nehemas’ influential (but contested) view that this is not the case. According to Nietzsche, values are judged good or bad on how they promote life, not solely by their history. Indeed, in GS, Nietzsche writes: “I have hardly detected a few meager preliminary efforts to explore the history of origins of these feelings and valuations (which is something quite different from a critique...” The point is that a critique can never arise simultaneously with the inquiry itself. The charge that Nietzsche committed a genetic fallacy is, according to Paul S. Loeb (1995), a more recent attempt to combat the influence of Nietzsche’s sociological explanations. For if we truly follow Nietzsche’s line of thought,

---

79 Ibid., section 3.
80 Ibid.
81 Nietzsche (2002); part 1, section 1.
83 Nietzsche (2008) section 345
how could the origin decide its value? Does the origin have some intrinsic value that is
timeless? Certainly not, if we believe in the effects of historical philosophizing. The origin of
a thing is most definitely being valued from our current mode of valuation, which may be
quite different from the valuation that spawned its existence.

While we may plausibly reject the notion that Nietzsche grounded his critique solely
on the origins themselves, a critique persists nonetheless. Furthermore, the need for a critique
is not a capricious event devoid of causal underpinnings. Nietzsche’s critique of morality
does not spawn from history itself; history is a tool for the critique which follows. This is an
idea which he (as we have discussed) cultivated in IH.

We shall examine sections derived from WP, (book one “European Nihilism” section
1, 2, 3, & 4) in order to illuminate our discussion. I believe these passages summarize much
of what we have discussed so far and set the tone for what will be explored in subsequent
sections.

1. “Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? (...) it is in one
   particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted.”

2. “The end of Christianity (...) is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all
   Christian interpretations of the world and of history; rebound from “God is truth” to the
   fanatical faith “All is false” (...)”

3. “Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the
   world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to
   nihilism. “Everything lacks meaning” (the untenability of one interpretation of the world,
   upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all
   interpretations of the world are false)....”

4. “(...) A critique of Christian morality is still lacking.”85

The first quote addresses the root cause of nihilism: Christian morality. However, I would
like to make the point that this is more complicated than what Nietzsche sketches above.
Even though he believed that Christianity represented a nihilistic outlook on life, it is not
Christianity per se that causes nihilism; rather, it is the void brought about by the downfall of

85 I have shortened all four of these passages. They are each quite lengthy and should be read as such in order to
grasp them fully. They can be found in WP (1968) Book one “European Nihilism, Toward and Outline”
(1885-1886), section 1, 2, 3, and 4.
Christianity which catalyzes nihilism. Here, we may consider the famous passage from GS (125), where the madman declares the ‘death of God’. In this section, Nietzsche describes how we ‘unchained this earth from its sun’, ‘drank up the sea’, and ‘wiped away the entire horizon’, signifying a tremendous and earth-shaking event where little makes sense any more. Furthermore, after we have done this, how are we to console ourselves? Where shall we turn? “With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves?”

Hence, Christianity is just another moral imperative that provides people with meaning. The downfall of Christianity, celebrated by Nietzsche, leads individuals to seek out meaning and values for themselves. Nietzsche praises this development, but he also laments the fact that not everyone will be able to cope with the feeling of moral nausea. Consequently, the onset of moral nausea may precipitate a descent into nihilism. Given the downfall of Christianity’s moral monopoly and the subsequent rise of nihilism, Nietzsche pondered on what advantages Christian morality provided. His answer was that “It granted man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away”. In this sense, Christian morality could be analogized to what is often attributed to Marx as ‘opium for the people’.

The second quote gives us the practical implications of Christianity's downfall: “God is truth” is converted to “all is false”. However, just as ‘God is truth’ is an expression of faith, so too may the nihilistic tendency to negate the world at any price also an expression of a certain type of faith. The question then arises: faith in what? It is the conviction that the world is devoid of inherent meaning, and our actions and motivations lack a connection to anything deemed worthy. The third quote delves deeper into the faith invested in skepticism and nihilism. The untenability of one interpretation of the moral order leads to a suspicion that any interpretation may be equally untenable. Notably, some have taken this section to advocate for Nietzsche as a meta-ethical nihilist. It should be clear by now that I do not share in this sentiment. Rather than embracing nihilism he sought to combat it. How? Nietzsche’s own medicine is quite different from what this passage suggests. Although

87 Nietzsche (1968) book one, part 1, “Nihilism”.
88 A prominent example of this is provided by Charles R. Pigden (2007), Nihilism, Nietzsche and the Doppelganger Problem. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 10 (5):441–456. Here, he defends Nietzsche as well as his own meta-ethical nihilism.

Nadeem J.Z. Hussain (2007) has also supported the view that Nietzsche was indeed a nihilist. However, he makes the argument that Nietzsche was a nihilist only in a methodological sense, i.e., that he bases his naturalism on the claim that nothing has value in itself. The other type of nihilist, who shares this sentiment but takes it as an argument against life, is not one Nietzsche would have wanted to associate himself with.
beyond the scope of this essay, to put it briefly, it involves affirming life, accepting one’s fate (amor fati) and creating new values. The final quote quoted is rather self-explanatory and sets the tone for the discussion in GM, which we shall turn to now.

4.4. History of Christian Morality: Ressentiment and Psychological Observations

In this section, I demonstrate how Nietzsche puts his historical philosophizing to practical use. In the first essay of GM, he reveals how certain values have a deep and integrated history and explores the psychology of moral convictions. Through this inquiry, we are then equipped to draw certain philosophical conclusions.

As discussed in the previous section, Nietzsche refutes the English hypothesis regarding the origin of moral sentiments. Contrary to the belief that moral sentiments originate from the consequences of actions, Nietzsche posits a distinct origin. Crucially, in Nietzsche’s psycho-historical explanation, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sprang first from a pathos of distance. This means that rather than being passive observers of a virtue ingrained upon their memory to the point of becoming “true in itself”, a master morality was created of the nobility, who felt themselves highly distinguished from the base. This created the moral term ‘good’.

Let us elaborate further on this. As pointed out earlier, it was through his philological training that Nietzsche first posed a real challenge to rival histories. “The signpost to the right road was for me the question: what was the real etymological significance of the designations for "good" coined in the various languages?”89 In this way, Nietzsche’s methodology differs greatly from other explanations. Good and bad, Nietzsche claims, had a parallel development. As stated above, “good” was merely an expression of a certain social class who possessed certain traits, and likewise “bad” was the representation of the other social class who did not possess those traits. In short, the concepts of good and bad did not arise from actions with favorable or unfavorable consequences. Rather, they constituted expressions of power.90 What is crucial for our purposes is not merely the historical discovery in isolation, but the significance that arises from said discovery. Recall the hypothesis posed in BGE 32 where

89 Nietzsche (1989) essay one, section 3.
90 Ibid., section 1-5.
Nietzsche posited a three-stage development of morality. Here, he notes that as one stage succumbs to the next, a monumental shift occurs in the history of human affairs. A prominent example of such a monumental shift occurred when the pre-Christian moral paradigm became inverted, and values were flipped upside down. Nietzsche claims that the Jews, lacking the earthly power of the nobles, sought to take their revenge in a spiritual manner. They attempted an inversion of the pathos of distance morality, transforming good into evil, and bad into good. Indeed, they were extremely successful in this endeavor, as the same concepts were inherited by Christianity and came to dominate the Western European morale for the subsequent two millennia. The spiritual revenge manifested itself through the psychological state of distress and contempt, known as “ressentiment”. Ressentiment gave birth to a certain set of values that viewed the external world as a threat. The Jews, the people of ressentiment, sought to negate life rather than embracing it. This is the creation of a destructive moral framework that Nietzsche would call ‘slave morality’, in contrast to master morality.

Let us zoom in for a moment. It is not the particulars of Nietzsche’s story to which we shall attend - one can read GM in Nietzsche’s own words to get the full story. Rather, what concerns us here is what the particulars amount to, or what conclusions we can infer based on the text itself. The distinction which Nietzsche makes between good and evil is not only noteworthy but also warrants closer examination. Despite the stark contrast between master and slave morality master in their interpretations of what is considered moral, it is arguable that their creation of different moral systems is rooted in a common underlying mechanism. Master morality is created out of a pathos of distance, wherein the individual feels himself as elevated above the weak. That sentiment finds expression as a manifestation of power and social pressure, giving rise to a particular type of morality. Likewise, the construction of slave morality is also an expression of power. In this context, evil is based on the current power of the master, and the weaker individual is trying to assert his claim on the right to interpret the world. Hence, if we are speaking in meta-ethical terms, clear expressivist elements emerge. According to this explanation, both the master and the slave do not reference any inherent property of “goodness” or “evil”. They are simply expressing their respective states of mind and attitudes. Of course, later on, these concepts would be incorporated into Christian

---

Ibid., GM 6-7

Ressentiment is a much appreciated term used by Nietzsche. It corresponds not entirely to “resentment”, but is not too far off either. An in-depth analysis has been provided by many authors. See, for instance: Nietzsche’s Psychology of Ressentiment Revenge and Justice in “On the Genealogy of Morals”, by Guy Elgat (2017). New York: Routledge.
morality, assuming the status of being objectively true. However, their origin lies in the expression of the speaker’s inner feelings.

The inverted concept of good, apart from serving as a form of spiritual revenge, bore another tremendous consequence. Whereas the noble sense of good was confined and exclusive, belonging to the aristocratic class, the new meaning of good became accessible to the masses. Good would then be universally applicable and readily available to all those who suffered. Nietzsche refers to the creation of new values as the “workshop of ideals”, and this workshop of ideals orchestrated a development that we now embody as the living legacy. The Jews, through their successes in the workshop of ideals, triumphed over Roman morality, thereby setting the stage for the next two millennia. The meaning of the dichotomy is also worth contemplating. The psychological dynamics of ressentiment and the pathos of distance morality are just two examples of different modes of valuations which are competing for dominance. This duality can be replaced to fit other discussions, for instance, the contrast between democracy and aristocracy. These are but specific examples that lack inherent importance in themselves. The significance lies in what they symbolize - a manifestation of the conflict and fluidity inherent in moral concepts. They illustrate how any moral system can be subject to interpretation based on one’s psychological inclinations. In Nietzsche’s view, “Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena, or speaking more precisely, a misinterpretation.”

4.5. Philosophical Extrapolations

We are now in a position to draw some preliminary conclusions based on our previous discussion. The inquiry into the history of morality extends beyond a mere academic endeavor for data collection. Nietzsche’s point is twofold: a) to demonstrate that historical development is contingent, not necessary, and that the values we deem “true” are neither absolute nor inherent but rather constructed; and b) to reveal that our current morality is a legacy of a past to which we belong but might be unable to associate with. Let us examine each point in further detail.

Richard White (1988) has suggested that “there cannot be an ‘original’ or ‘true’ designation of value since the master and the slave must always evaluate the world in entirely

93 Nietzsche (2003), Those Who “Improve” Humanity, section 1
different ways.” This suggestion raises the question of inevitability, which any philosophy of history must confront at some juncture. The idea is that the dual perspectives of the slave and the master introduces an element of subjectivity into the evaluation of values, prompting the insight that a singular designation of value may be elusive. We may ask: What does Nietzsche’s story about the triumph of slave morality tell us? Why was master morality finally overcome? Was it because this particular morality was inherently superior or objectively true? Indeed, we may also pose counterfactual questions inviting us to envisage the reverse accomplishment. What would have happened if Roman morality had triumphed? The perspectival character of morality necessitates that we ask such questions. For our purposes, the normative question of which type of morality “should” have prevailed is besides the point. What Nietzsche’s genealogical inquiry tells us is that values are always contingent on a particular development. This implies that our present values represent only one among several potential possibilities. Nevertheless, that fact alone does not suffice for an argument in favor of skepticism. Some may contend that the current moral paradigm is indeed a necessary result of historical struggles, positing that humanity has gradually recognized these values as “true”, or “correct”.

However, asserting that history is contingent does not imply that history is nothing but a complete chaos made up of loose and scattered pieces. If Nietzsche’s genealogy delivers the message that our contemporary morality is a result of a historical past, then surely there is a development aspect involved. It might initially seem paradoxical to claim that history is both contingent and developmental. However, I believe that Nietzsche successfully discharges any potential tension. Here, I align with Jensen (2013), who writes that “Nietzsche’s unique accomplishment in the philosophy of history was to simultaneously recognize the developmental character of reality and that his own account of it represents a symbolic way of description, a way that admits the anti-realist, perspectival, and historical character of his historiography [...] The character of reality is, for Nietzsche, a constant process, a continual flux of forms and shapes, the meaning of which shifts and transmogrifies along with the conceptual symbols of those interpreters who try to encapsulate it. Our values, as a part of reality, will be no different.” Thus, I believe that Jensen is suggesting that Nietzsche’s

---

framework accommodates a development aspect by virtue of allowing perspectival interpretations of the past. In this view, a development represents just one potential trajectory among many. Perhaps there is a pattern to history, but that pattern does not belong to history itself. Instead, patterns are after-constructions resulting from perspectival evaluations.

Jensen (2013) writes that “Nietzsche’s central presupposition [...] is that the values we hold today to be universal, timeless, and inviolable are really a culturally specific, temporary, and contingent manifestation of a tortuously long development.”\(^97\) A more idealistic counterargument, seeking to refute the Nietzschean skepticism, posits that if we have reached a stage considered ‘evolved’, then surely it implies that no other development was possible? What I mean here is that such an argument presupposes a certain rational element inherent in the trajectory of history. Granted, the same argument may imply that progress indicates a sort of barbarism in previous cultures. However, it still holds the notion that history itself (as an abstract phenomenon) possesses some rational guidance.\(^98\) To spell it out more vividly: Why would our current moral system be constituted in a way if it was not the “best possible morality”? This argument suggests that if there were another development deemed ‘better’, then that would have come about naturally.

Certainly, this idealistic notion of developmental history aligns with perspectives that Nietzsche would strongly oppose. He does so on several grounds. I shall explore these contentions in greater detail in the next part on perspectivism, but I shall mention one counterargument just briefly. One reason for Nietzsche’s opposition is that we have no epistemic justification for making such claims. Rather than asserting that we ‘know’ our morality to be the best possible, Nietzsche contends that it is a psychological coping mechanism which tells us that this has to be the case. To reiterate the point made by Nietzsche in TW regarding the psychology of progress: “every age thinks in this way, has to think in this way.”\(^99\) Regarding our modern morality, which Nietzsche held to be a result of the inversion of master morality and the dominance of Christianity, the recognition that there were multiple potential developments and we happened to choose the ‘wrong’ could have profound consequences. Rather than face a cold hard truth, perhaps we would rather stick with the wrong development than to admit that morality has failed us.

The idea that our present morality is the result of a past to which we might be disconnected follows from the first point about the contingency of historical development.

---

\(^97\) *Ibid.*

\(^98\) This is the same idea formulated by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit.*

Indeed, if history had a necessary aspect, and we are the result of a determined development, then there would be no contradiction. However, by rejecting the absolutist notion of a necessary development, this realization is meant to foster the idea that we might be ill-suited to a particular morality if this morality is psychologically disconnected from us. The underlying idea is this: if Nietzsche is able to show how modern secular morality which praises objectivity and mediocrity (which he called herd morality), is essentially an extension of the Christian moral outlook, does that revelation undermine our faith in that specific morality? In essence, Nietzsche’s inquiry challenges the foundations of contemporary moral systems by revealing potential historical disconnections. Here is another way of phrasing it: Secular morality can either adopt a Christian moral outlook although recognizing that it has roots in a world of thought disconnected from their own reality. Alternatively, they can reject the dependance of the Christian moral outlook which in turn gives them two choices: embrace nihilism or to create new values. Out of these three possible routes, it is clear that Nietzsche favors the creation of new values. However, I think it is worth noting that he seems to prefer any moral outlook, be it Christian or otherwise, over a state of nihilism.

However, here we are at risk of potentially committing a genetic fallacy. It is an insufficient foundation for a critique merely to assert that the present is disconnected from the past. Granted, this might stir up feelings of absurdity, but this alone does not establish a compelling case for the abandonment of past values. For Nietzsche, the key question is not whether it makes sense to uphold “old” values. Instead, the central presupposition is to ask what the value of these past values are. Depending on the answer to that question, this introspection may give rise to other practical changes, such as the transition from one moral paradigm to another. However, for our purposes, the essential insight about a historical inquiry into the roots of a particular value is to unmask the absolutist illusion surrounding it. That is the key implication of Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing.

4.6. Concluding Remarks on GM

David Owen (2008) points out that “any author presumptuousness enough to offer a study of this text [GM] needs to have a clear (and defensible) strategy for approaching it.” My strategy in approaching this text was not to provide an exhaustive exegetical reading. Rather,

---

the aim was to illustrate how our theoretical discussion, given in the first part of this essay, is put to use through the discussions in GM. The overarching point can be summarized as follows: Nietzsche’s uses history as a philosophical methodology in order to investigate where moral judgments originate. Having traced their origins back to ancient history, he shows the presence of two antagonistic ideas with the potential for divergent developments. One of these ideas, slave morality, triumphed, which in turn sparked a long and hegemonic pathway into modernity. Nietzsche denies that values have a metaphysical origin, and instead seeks to “naturalize” values by showing their true history.

This descriptive phase can then transition into a critique. If our moral framework is based on ideas formulated 2000 years ago but since then have lost their original legislator (i.e., the word of God), then what does that entail? One thing in particular has been clear to me since first encountering GM. When we express a moral statement, i.e., when we declare that a certain act is good or bad, or that someone is a good or bad person, we are simply expressing a conviction. The cause of this conviction is perhaps oblivious to us. It is rooted in a specific historical development, and we are most likely unaware of how and why this development was possible. The genealogical method traces this development in order to answer such questions, thereby offering valuable insights into the value of these values. The critique does not emerge instantly of the inquiry, but it provides us with resources to begin a critique and a reevaluation.
5. Perspectivism through *GM*

The final part of our inquiry into Nietzsche’s genealogical method will revolve around his attributed *perspectivism*. I aim to demonstrate how *GM* embodies a perspectival history which has epistemological implications for moral questions. This chapter will encompass both exegetical remarks as well as relevant interpretations. I understand Nietzsche’s perspectivism to be premised on two fundamental ideas: a commitment to the naturalistic methodology which rejects the metaphysics of the Platonic tradition, and the assertion that moral convictions stem from perspectival interpretations, which may or may not be truthful. This part is divided into two main segments. The first explores the ramifications of the concept of truth, a topic frequently debated in interpretations of perspectivism. The second segment will revolve around the idea of moral change and moral progress, a theme that is somewhat overlooked in Nietzschean interpretations. I believe that neglecting this aspect is a mistake, as both of these ideas emerge as a consequence of Nietzsche’s historical philosophy.

5.1. Truth

We have seen how Nietzsche scorns the utilitarians for presenting a “blue” genealogy. In contrast, his own account view is meant to be more truthful. Nevertheless, considering the implications of Nietzsche’s genealogy and, as we will explore, his perspectivism, the concept of truth may become elusive. Arguments can be made suggesting that Nietzsche suggests the non-existence of truth itself. If this holds, what would the implications be for moral considerations? Bernard Williams, in his work *Truth and Truthfulness*, posited that if truth ceases to be the aim of our inquiries, what remains is merely a “battle of rhetorics.” If Nietzsche argues that truth is dependent on the subject’s point of view, thereby endorsing subjectivism, does this stance undermine his project in *GM*? Such a question will be considered here as well as the following ones: What are the epistemological consequences of Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing, and how are they related to moral questions? In the following sections, I argue that Nietzsche does allow for something to be designated as truth, albeit in a more complex way than conventionally understood.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism not easily definable. However, we may begin by considering the following remark articulated by Hales, S.D. (2020): “perspectivism is not one

---

precisely defined doctrine, but a cluster of related ideas about the subjectivity of truth, anti-realist metaphysics, a bundle theory of objects, the revaluation of values and the creation of one’s own virtues, and the role of varying interpretations in knowledge.”\textsuperscript{102} Hence, perspectivism encompasses a variety of different topics. For the present purposes, I will focus on the concept of truth, the varying interpretations of knowledge, and the prospects of moral progress and moral change.

Briefly, however, it might be good to say a few words about what is meant by “anti-realist metaphysics”. Realist metaphysics, essentially, believe that there exists a world beyond the world of appearances. We may consider Plato’s theory of forms or the Christian idea of God in heaven. Prima facie, it might seem outdated to maintain a dual-world theory, but it is more commonsensical than we might initially think. For instance, in metaethics, the foundational debate is between realists and anti-realist, each with more specific perspectives internally. The key point of contention revolves around the existence of independent moral truths. Realism affirms its existence, and so moral concepts are part of the external world rather than being arbitrary constructions devised by humans. This realist interpretation lends support from common sense. When contemplating moral judgments, our intuition tells us that there must be a right or wrong answer. Moral dilemmas, accordingly, may be resolved by finding the right answer. To conceptualize this, consider this quote from quote Peter Singer (1981) in his critique of moral realism:

“When morality was thought of as a system of laws handed down from on high, it was natural to think of moral judgments as attempts to describe moral laws which exist independently of us. The reality behind moral judgments seemed to be the will of God. Perhaps the legacy of past belief in a divine legislator is responsible for our ready assumption that there is something "out there" which our ethical judgments reflect.”\textsuperscript{103}

By contrast, Nietzsche is an anti-realist because he denied realist doctrine. Furthermore, as discussed in section 2.3, he was a methodological naturalist who took nature and reality as canvases which individuals filled with their own colors. Nietzsche’s perspectivism aligns with anti-realist metaphysics as it denies the existence of an objective and transcendent reality beyond the perspectives of individuals.


Let us leave aside the previous discussion and zoom in on the notion of truth, starting with a quote from GM: “There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes; we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our objectivity," be.),”\textsuperscript{104} We may discern from this quote that knowledge, indeed objective knowledge, is possible but more complicated than what scientists and philosophers have traditionally assumed it to be. When discussing truth and knowledge, the discourse usually emanates from a specific perspective, often assuming its universality and generality. However, Nietzsche wants to argue that truth is perspectival and susceptible to partial interpretations. While such themes will be explored in more depth, we must also scrutinize the alleged attack on objectivity which Nietzsche is frequently attributed to wholeheartedly undertake.

There are essentially two camps regarding the issue of truth in Nietzsche’s philosophy. While both camps agree that Nietzsche has debunking consequences for the notion of truth they disagree on how far these consequences reach. According to the ‘postmodernist’ account, Nietzsche’s debunking of truth inevitably leads to relativism.\textsuperscript{105} Jensen (2013) points out that Hayden White in his \textit{Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe} (1973) embodies this postmodern version of Nietzsche. Jensen writes: “White claims Nietzsche denied that there can be a single historical account that perfectly corresponds to events as they had actually been since all historical judgments falsify the genuine nature of that which they allegedly represent.”\textsuperscript{106} On the contrary, there are those who recognize Nietzsche’s perspectival theory of morality but maintain non-relativized interpretations. I align with this perspective and will demonstrate how Nietzsche’s perspectivism does not necessarily entail relativism. On this note, Frederick Appel (1996) has made the interesting observation that by adopting a perspectival viewpoint, one is more likely to escape rather than succumb to relativistic notions of moral judgments.\textsuperscript{107} Crucially, I argue that we ought to make a distinction within Nietzsche’s relativism. There is some ground for claiming that Nietzsche was \textit{descriptively} relativistic, but fails to be so normatively, and certainly not philosophically relativistic, as many interpreters have argued.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{104} Nietzsche (1989); III, 12.

\textsuperscript{105} For instance, Maudemarie Clark (1991) points out that some thinkers emphasize that continental philosophy in the twentieth century was dealing primarily with Nietzsche’s claim that “truth, like God, is dead”.

\textsuperscript{106} Jensen (2013)


\textsuperscript{108} Berry, Jessica N. writes that “If there is a heavyweight title in the division “Most Infamous Relativists Who Never Were,” it surely goes to Friedrich Nietzsche”. “Nietzsche and relativism”, in The Routledge Handbook of
First, let us assume the role of devil’s advocate and ask what a relativistic account looks like, given the Nietzschean background we have provided? A proponent of relativism might posit that no moral claim holds superiority or greater truthfulness than another. This assertion stems from two premises: a) the absence of moral facts to corroborate this, and b) the contention that moral judgments are only relative to the point of view of the person (or group, culture, society etc) uttering them. This characterization follows a standard account of moral relativism which posits that “morals are tied to a group, so that different groups have different moralities and there is no common standard by which they can be judged.”

Another formulation which conveys the same idea is but is more explicit on the notion of truth reads: “Moral relativism is the view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others.”

In an attempt to apply the same type of relativism to Nietzsche, one author has argued that “Nietzsche argues intensively and effectively about morality, his thought undoubtedly has a pronounced relativistic tendencies” This is true to a certain extent. While Nietzsche would agree that a single code of morality is inapplicable to everyone due to varying wants and needs, he did make normative assessments by distinguishing which types of moral norms are harmful or beneficial. Consequently, there is some truth in saying that he was descriptively relativistic, but remains normative in his commitments regarding the comparative merits of different moralities. Richard Schact (1983) shared this view early on in the interpretive corpus of Nietzsche’s perspectivism. He wrote that the “conditions of life of human beings… are indeed “relative”; but what they are relative to are circumstances pertaining to the actual constitutions of human beings of different sorts.”

Leiter (2002) gives an interpretation which also corroborates my argument. According to Leiter, Nietzsche only scorns a particular mode of valuation while celebrating another. Leiter writes: “To move "beyond good and evil" is to abandon values with certain genetic, evaluative and metaphysical properties, and to embrace certain values with contrasting

---

112 Schacht (1983).
properties.”113 This also implies, as Leiter emphasizes, that Nietzsche’s ‘attack on morality’ is directed at the specific morality characterized by the three aforementioned traits. Accordingly, Leiter argues that Nietzsche’s renowned slogan of moving “beyond good and evil” means moving beyond the original meaning behind ‘good’ and ‘evil’. As observed in our discussion of GM, ‘good’ and ‘evil’ held particular etymological significance. If Nietzsche wanted to move ‘beyond morality’, as suggesting transcending morality all together, then indeed this could be seen as a relativistic statement. However, Nietzsche means something much more specific; he aims to offer a perspectival interpretation that approaches a more ‘truthful’ understanding.

Nevertheless, it might be argued, as Michael Rosen (2002) notes, that Nietzsche’s perspectivism goes hand in hand with moral relativism, since it could entail that each perspective holds a unique and subjective claim to truth, rendering objective truth impossible.114 I believe, however, that this understanding of Nietzsche’s perspectivism as lending support to relativism is mischaracterized. Rosén writes: “Either he [Nietzsche] does not really believe that perspectivism is true, or perspectivism does not imply that we are incapable of attaining knowledge of the truth.”115 Again though, as I have argued, Nietzsche never denies truth itself, he denies things to be true in themselves, the idea that there exists an objective and metaphysical moral realm, and that there is only one perspective with a veto on truth. Hence, it is accurate to say that Nietzsche is in a certain sense relativistic about moral claims because he emphasizes the plurality of meaning as indicative of one’s own limited position. However, as we have seen, he does not outright deny the equal bearing of each moral conviction; that would be, in Nietzsche’s words, slave-morality rhetoric and a democratic prejudice talking.

It is also clear that Nietzsche considers his own perspective in GM superior to the ‘false perspective’ presented by other genealogists of morals.116 Furthermore, Nietzsche denies the relativistic thesis that each perspective holds its own claim to truth; a perspective may equally be untrue, false and misleading: “Truth and the belief that something is true: two completely diverse worlds of interests…”117 Hence, a relativist might be just as equally dogmatic as a realist, since he asserts that there is no way for anyone else to judge his standpoint, precisely because it is his standpoint and he holds it to be true, irregardless of

115 Ibid.
what anyone else thinks. Both realism and relativism does, in this sense, disallow for perspectival interference with their concept of truth. At the same time, Nietzsche also stresses the need to liberate ourselves from perspectives which are harmful, and create our own free-spirited values: “each one of us should devise his own virtue, his own categorical imperative.”118 Those who interpret Nietzsche as denying truth altogether often rely on excerpts such as “there are no facts, only interpretations”, without considering the broader context. Such a view, Clark (1990) calls a radical interpretation who “take Nietzsche’s claim that truths are illusions to state his ultimate position on truth”.119

5.2. Perspectivism ≠ Relativism

The relationship between Nietzsche’s perspectivism and his historical philosophizing is intricate. I believe that his perspectivism emerges as a consequence of his historical inquiry. In the preface to BGE, Nietzsche famously wrote that “talking about spirit and the Good like Plato did meant standing truth on its head and disowning even perspectivism, which is the fundamental condition of all life.”120 According to Nietzsche, philosophers such as Plato thought unhistorically. Plato’s metaphysical theory of forms tells us that the ‘Good’ is the highest ultimate value of which all earthly valuations stand in a shadowy relation to. When we imitate the Good we act morally and in accordance with “the Good’, since the Good is the truth. Thus, Plato assumes that there is a good, independent of whatever attitude one takes towards it. The same logic is also applied in Christian metaphysics. Here, the word of God constitutes the moral truth, and by adhering to these truths, we can live morally.121 This is what Nietzsche denounces when he writes that Plato ‘stood truth on its head’, because such a point of view turns truth into one uniform category; one perspective. What is essential to history is that there is a multitude of good and bad, and it is by recognizing this that we become a bit more uncertain as to what constitutes “the Good”, and a bit more certain what people believe to be good and bad. Hence, this is what I mean when I propose that Nietzsche

118 Ibid., section 11.
119 Clark, M (1991) p.12
120 Nietzsche (2002) preface, section 1. There are better translations available. For convenience, I used an online version which conveys the same message. Although, I dislike the usage of the word “perspectivism” by the author. Many other translations use “perspectives” instead.
121 For those interested in the biblical references, see John 14.6, 16.13, 17.17 and Titus 1.1-2.
believed that Plato and other idealists practiced \textit{unhistorical} philosophizing, in contrast to historical philosophizing.

Following Nietzsche, I propose that moral judgments can be understood as ‘convictions’. I will be extraordinarily clear here and note that this is \textit{my} belief, but it is based on the implications of Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing. What these convictions are and how they arise is fundamentally connected to the historical era which one operates within. Crucially, these historical eras have their own perspectival narrative about what is good and what is bad. According to this argument, morality possesses no inherent truth. There are beliefs and disbeliefs, agreements and disagreements, but we do not have to settle for the relativistic notion that the discussion ends there. We can be convinced that our moral practices are superior to that of a previous society in an earlier historical setting, and we need not excuse this. Convictions, just like perspectives, can be altered, redefined, and improved upon. When discussing morality in terms of ‘true’ and ‘false’ as denoting some ultimate objective value, then there is no middle ground between disagreements and agreements; morality is reduced to mathematical binaries. It is my interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism and also his historical philosophizing that we cannot escape the human tendency in wanting or needing to assert truthfulness in moral claims. Whether or not this actually corresponds to something external is besides the point. If we get caught in the endless hunt for the one true perspective we might miss out on other important epistemic possibilities. A multitude of perspectives raises the likelihood of knowledge; the reduction of perspectives is also a reduction of epistemic possibilities.

Throughout this section, I have focused on Nietzsche’s perspectivism as a \textit{negative} stance. That is, it tells us more about what is \textit{not} rather than what \textit{is}. Indeed, for me, this is where Nietzsche excels. However, there are interpretations of Nietzsche’s perspectivism which aims to establish a positive epistemology. For instance, in \textit{Knowledge from a Human Point of View} (2020), a book on perspectivism in its wide applicability, Steven D. Hales has written a chapter “Nietzsche’s Epistemic Perspectivism”, which seeks to contrast his interpretation both to those who interpret Nietzsche as a skeptic and as a mere pragmatist. Here, he makes a useful distinction that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is “two-tiered: knowledge is perspectival because truth itself is, and in addition there is a methodological perspectivism in which distinct ways of knowing are utilized to produce understanding.”\textsuperscript{122} Indeed, the question of whether or not Nietzsche is to be considered a skeptic is a complex one.

\textsuperscript{122} Hales, S.D. (2020)
However, I share Hale’s view that those who take Nietzsche’s skeptical remarks as indicative of his overall viewpoint often overlook his non-skeptical statements. This is not to deny that Nietzsche was a skeptic in a certain sense (he most definitely was), but he did not turn skepticism into nihilism.

What is absolutely essential for understanding Nietzsche’s perspectivism is that it is not another version of relativism. Nietzsche does not deny truth itself, rather, he denies that there are truths which are eternally unchangeable. In Human, All Too Human, (HHI) Nietzsche famously wrote that “there are no eternal facts, nor are there any eternal truths.” This quote can be supplemented by another from TI: “Moral judgments have this in common with religious ones: they believe in realities that are unreal. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena, or speaking more precisely, a misinterpretation.” At first glance, passages like these may appear to align with Nietzsche’s skeptical and relativistic tendencies. However, what is noteworthy is that they do not deny truth per se; rather, they reject the existence of eternal truths and facts and it offers a reformulation of morality as it has been conventionally understood. It is when we categorize truths and facts as eternal that we move beyond the perspective and historical reality and into the otherworldliness of realist metaphysics which Nietzsche clearly detested. It makes no sense to tell “fictional stories about [another] world than this one”, Nietzsche wrote in TI. Otherworldliness means that perspective(s) are irrelevant for epistemic purposes. If the truth of the matter is posited beyond our comprehension, or in the Platonic heaven, then there is only one true perspective which is true regardless of the multitude of other perspectives. For Nietzsche, this is a gross violation of the natural world, since it entails that we are all operating under distorted illusions if we cannot acquire access to that one true perspective. This is what Nietzsche meant when wrote that perspectives are “the fundamental condition of all life.”

Our discussion leads me to a final consideration of Nietzsche’s perspectivism and its relevance for this paper. Given that Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing deals with the connection between morality and history, I believe a word on moral change and moral progress is fitting. There is little appreciation for this in the secondary literature. Many interpretations address Nietzsche’s perspective on moral change within the framework of his re-evaluative project, namely his normative considerations. This is a discussion which is

123 Nietzsche (1910) book 1 section 2
125 Ibid., “Reason in philosophy”, section 6
126 Nietzsche (2002) preface, section 1. There are better translations available. For convenience, I used an online version which conveys the same message. Although, I dislike the usage of the word “perspectivism” by the author. Many other translations use “perspectives” instead.
irrelevant here. Furthermore, if Nietzsche is put into discussions of moral progress, it is stated that what little he had to say was insubstantial. Thus, I consider it necessary to delve deeper into this area. I will not be able to do so exhaustively, but enough to get an idea of what Nietzsche’s stance towards these topics are and their relation to perspectivism.

5.3. Change, Progress, History

Perspectivism has important consequences for the idea of moral change and moral progress. In a way, GM tells us a story about how moral change is possible, but it does not say anything about progress in the traditional sense. Exploring the relationship between moral change and progress is crucial, especially considering the consequences of perspectival morality. To understand how perspectives change and whether progress is possible within such a framework, we will begin by examining the idea of moral change and subsequently finish with a discussion of moral progress.

In its most basic form, what Dale Jamieson (2002) has labeled the “naive” conception of moral progress, an account of moral progress involves comparing two states of affairs. If the subsequent state is deemed better than the preceding one, then it implies that progress has occurred. However, an aspect which is left out by this neat definition is the aspect of time. If we grant that moral change does occur, when does it so? The same is true of moral progress: if progress is possible, how and when does it happen? Indeed, Nietzsche's charge against previous philosophers hinges on their fixation with the timeless nature of moral concepts. Recall the quote given previously in this essay that philosophers have sought to identify man as an “aeterna veritas”, and that they lack a “historical sense.” In both of these cases, man, and morality, is put outside the flux of time. In comparison with these ‘other’ philosophers, Nietzsche sought to account for moral change in naturalistic terms. According to Kathryn Pyne Parsons (1974) “Nietzsche stands almost alone in trying to examine the full structure of moral change.” It is interesting that she writes “full structure”, since it is not entirely clear that Nietzsche actually does offer a comprehensive answer to the

127 This is also the view of Jensen (2013), who writes that “where Darwinians see moral progress over time, Nietzsche sees at best no progress and at worst deterioration.” P. 168.
idea of moral change. He does offer examples of how change may be possible, but it does not adequately create an exhaustive account.

In essay one of GM, we saw how moral change occurred through power being shifted from one group to the other. Here, a fundamental insight about moral change is the way in which language is altered. The word ‘good’ will have different semantic meanings depending on which group defines it. What is crucial here is that it is certain that those who define moral concepts are never unbiased; there is always some agenda attached to it. This can be seen in contrast to those who hold that moral truths are inherently objective. If something is objectively true, then it is true independent of one’s point of view. In essay two of GM, where Nietzsche investigates the history of punishment, he makes an interesting remark regarding ‘bad conscience’. Here, he remarks how bad conscience was a consequence of instinct turning inwards, of society turning man from his wild habitat into his domestication: “I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced - that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace.”131

Thus, in the case of the ‘domestication of man’, his drives and instincts are not eradicated but rather internalized regardless of his desires. Morality of custom demands to conform to the standards of society, that is, a power higher than himself. Furthermore, in essay two of GM, Nietzsche also gives us the counterintuitive claim that pity and the decline of violence is a modern idea which Christianity and neo-Christian morality has turned upside down. Nietzsche writes: “Today, when suffering is always brought forward as the principal argument against existence, as the worst question mark, one does well to recall the ages in which the opposite opinion prevailed because men were unwilling to refrain from making suffer and saw in it an enchantment of the first order, a genuine seduction to life.”132 In both of these cases we are provided with examples of moral change, but it remains silent on whether or not it should count as “progress”.

Regarding this perplexity, Paul Katsafanas (2020) has written the following relevant remarks: “Part of what the Genealogy tries to demonstrate is that transitions in moral convictions cannot be explained as mere refinements of earlier values, but must instead be seen as discontinuous breaks and leaps; moreover, the Genealogy tries to show that these discontinuities are better explained by psychological and social factors than by epistemic

considerations.”  

I believe this passage describes Nietzsche’s position quite accurately. In effect, it means that the relationship between epistemology and moral progress is unwarranted. In contemporary debates, this has been referred to as “pessimistic meta-induction”, a doctrine which holds that there is no rational way of knowing whether or not progress has been made, since there simply are no epistemic justification for making such a claim. Nietzsche does not go into great details on this, but he does have some noteworthy remarks. It should be noted, however, that Nietzsche is not really concerned with progress as it is conventionally understood. He cares little about progress in a ‘wide sense’, and cares a great detail about progress in the individual. For instance, in WP, he writes: “‘Mankind” does not advance, it does not even exist. The overall aspect is that of a tremendous experimental laboratory in which a few successes are scored, scattered throughout all ages, while there are untold failures, and all order, logic, union, and obligingness are lacking.”  

Nevertheless, the implications of historical philosophizing have consequences for the idea of moral progress. Nietzsche wrote in TL that “We modern men, very delicate, very vulnerable and paying and receiving consideration in a hundred ways, imagine in fact that this sensitivity humanity which we represent, this achieved unanimity on forbearance, in readiness to help, in mutual trust, is a positive advance, that with this we have gone far beyond the men of the Renaissance. But every age thinks in this way, has to think in this way.” Thus, he acknowledges the inescapable psychologizing of claiming one's moral convictions to be superior and simultaneously making normative judgments about an earlier stage in history.

This passage exposes a key insight into Nietzsche’s position on progress. The idea that time itself would be enough to count as progress is for Nietzsche absurd. If time were enough, would there ever come a point where we have reached an “end”? What I mean here is that if every age thinks that they are the endpoint of historical progress, then the chain will continue indefinitely, since the next age will also believe that they are an improvement of the former. Hence, this is the pessimistic meta-inductive argument all over again. Nietzsche’s criticism is directed towards the imagined omnipotence of Bernard William’s ‘progressivists’ who believe they are in a position capable of making epistemically sound judgments about

---

135 Nietzsche (1968). Book one section 90.
their moral status. Furthermore, this progressivist thesis can be seen as an extension of the Christian ideal in a modern form. Nietzsche writes in *WP* that “the belief in progress towards the ideal is the only form in which a goal in history is thought of today. In *summa:* one has transferred the arrival of the “kingdom of God” into the future, on earth, in human form— but fundamentally one has held fast to the belief in the old ideal.”137 However, this does not imply that Nietzsche, or anyone else, should refrain from making normative judgments about moral progress. It is for Nietzsche a psychological fact that every age will claim their superiority, and it would therefore be absurd to try and oppose this. Nietzsche himself believed that modern culture was a sign of decay which halted individual growth, and that we would be better off in changing the trajectory of the modern spirit, and he was also more inclined to discuss moral progress in relationship to individuals rather than at large.

The relationship between perspectivism and moral change can be summarized according to Nietzsche’s own words: “anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it.”139 If morality is that which is invented, or, the “interpretation of certain phenomena”, there is always another competing interpretation on the horizon. The most successful interpretation is not the one that aligns with some eternal and unchangeable truth, but rather, it gains supremacy if it is powerful enough to encapsulate a claim to moral hegemony. A perspective is a powerful frame of mind which sets the rules for the established paradigm, and that perspective will be open for change when it is reinterpreted by another superior power. Does that constitute progress? Nietzsche would invite us to believe so since it is hardly possible that we could believe otherwise, but if we accept the implications of perspectival epistemology - how does one truly know? Nietzsche is a skeptic in this regard for the two following reasons: a) the inescapability of human psychology and perhaps evolution *necessitates* that we must believe in moral progress; and b) there is no universal and objective measurement of which we might assess whether or not progress has been made, since that measurement is contingently bound to the interpreter and that moral paradigm.

138 For instance, in *TI*, part “Expeditions of an Untimely Man”, section 39, Nietzsche writes that democracy is a “decaying form of the state.”
5.4. Final Reflections on Nietzschean Perspectivism

In the preceding discussion, I have demonstrated the interconnectedness of Nietzsche’s perspectivism and his historical philosophizing. The relationship is manifested in the three following ways:

1. As an epistemological commitment, perspectivism tells us that truth may be historically contingent as being defined by certain groups at a certain time. This does not mean that there is no truth at all, but indicates rather that we ought to be skeptical towards universal notions of truth.

2. By offering us specific examples of how moral concepts change over time, Nietzsche shows us how we might be able to give a more general account of how moral change is possible. For Nietzsche, moral change occurs when a new interpretation gains supremacy over an old one which indicates a transition of power. An interpretation may gain power by different means. As we saw in GM, the Jews executed revenge by inverting moral concepts which offered a new interpretation of the moral order.

3. Nietzsche was highly skeptical of the way in which moral progress is typically perceived. Indeed, given the way moral change operates, that is, paradigms competing for dominion, it proves difficult to make epistemically sound inferences about progress. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s psychologizing aims to expose the inherent tendency to see ourselves as the endpoint of history, a realization that implies skepticism towards the notion of progress.
6. Conclusion: The Implications of Historical Philosophizing

We have now reached the end of this thesis. I will provide a short summary of the discussions given throughout the essay and then draw conclusions based on my initial goal of my inquiry: to show the interconnectedness of Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing to his moral philosophy and perspectival epistemology. There are, of course, lots more that can be said on the topics which have been discussed. Throughout this essay I have hoped to maintain a degree of generality as well as to provide some in depth analysis on particular subjects. Often, one comes at the expense of the other. Hopefully, I avoided this by staying on course with my thesis.

Nietzsche’s historical philosophizing not only reveals the origin of values but also illustrates how they change, develop, and ultimately dissolve. As such, there are numerous ways to extract philosophical insights from this methodology. In this essay, I have focused on how historical philosophizing has implications for moral philosophy. Although I have left some aspects unexplored due to the impossible task of covering everything within this confined space - especially regarding the normative implications of Nietzsche’s moral philosophy - I hope to have shown how his normative critique would have been futile without his historical undertaking.

Due to the confinement of my thesis, I have also had to neglect a comprehensive analysis of Nietzsche’s psychology. Nevertheless, I have provided examples of how his psychologizing comes into play. For instance, we saw how GM was a type of psycho-historical narration that not only sought to retell things as they happened but also to draw psychological insights based on those observations. We also saw how Nietzsche’s psychology was highly relevant in discussions regarding moral progress, where he asserted that it might be a psychological necessity for each generation to uphold their standpoint as morally advanced. This goes to show how interconnected different parts of Nietzsche’s philosophy are in a whole unifying system - psychology, history, morality, epistemology; bottomless fields of research which he managed to merge into a philosophical methodology.

Let us then draw some conclusions. Nietzsche’s insights lead us to understand the origin and working of morality. Values arise through the interpretation of the world, and morality emerges when a particular interpretation gains dominance. That interpretation seeks to manifest itself as the one true perspective with access to the true picture of reality. Nietzsche argues, however, that it is not truth which we seek when making moral assertions, but power. Claim to truthfulness is in reality disguised as strong convictions, as means in
order to gain power and domination. A moral paradigm arises if that perspective is able to successfully claim the right of interpretation. Once a paradigm is put in place, it might be difficult to oppose it. Naturally, a paradigm will seek to protect itself, to guard against other competing interpretations to the moral order. As such, it will claim that other perspectives are false, untrue, immoral. What Nietzsche praises is to break free from dogmatism that upholds the world and nature as unifold and unhistorical. To claim the validity and universality of one interpretation means that we are potentially missing out on other forms of explanations. This is why it is essential to look back before we look forward. Nietzsche's historical philosophizing teaches us that values have a path from point A to point B. If we neglect inquiring into point A, and begin our analysis by solely focusing on point B (analyzing man as an aeterna veritas), we are overlooking vital information. In conclusion, it is by investigating the roots of something that we may gain valuable insights into its essence.
References


[https://doi.org/10.1007/s40961-021-00233-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40961-021-00233-x)


Friedrich Nietzsche & Walter Arnold Kaufmann. The Portable Nietzsche. Penguin Books 1982,


https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27041-4_2


Silk, Alex (2015) Nietzschean Constructivism: Ethics and Metaethics for All and None, Inquiry, 58:3, 244-280, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2013.878666


