

Nietzsche's Hermeneutic Significance

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In the past half-century, philosophers on the European continent have, with increasing frequency, characterized their investigations as "hermeneutical." Both traditional metaphysics and traditional epistemology have appeared to be incapable of solving many of the problems with which they have struggled since the time of Plato. This incapacity is viewed today not as the result of faulty solutions; rather, it comes forth as a consequence of asking the wrong kinds of questions. Heidegger's hermeneutics arose out of his attempt to re-think metaphysics and we find contemporary hermeneutics speaking of the move beyond epistemology. What this hermeneutic challenge to traditional philosophy points to is an emphasis on interpretation rather than the traditional pursuit of metaphysical and epistemological foundations upon which to erect a philosophical system. Yet by emphasizing the interpretive nature of perception and knowledge, the proponents of this view face the following dilemma: how to avoid the dogmatic positing of a single correct interpretation without lapsing into an unmitigated relativism which, in rejecting "correctness" as the interpretive telos, is unable to adjudicate between competing interpretations. This dilemma of dogmatism and relativism, I would argue, is the central problem confronting hermeneutics and can be seen to animate the debates between Gadamer and Betti, Gadamer and Habermas, as well as the current controversy between the Heideggerian and deconstructionist approaches to interpretation.

Nietzsche's text can perhaps be of assistance in arriving at a solution to this dilemma in two distinct yet interconnected ways. First, Nietzsche considers text as an "object" of hermeneutic inquiry. Few texts in the history of philosophy have been the subject of such diverse and divergent interpretations as that of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's works have been taken as providing the philosophical foundations of the Nazi master race as well as supplying some of the insights upon which a humanistic psychological theory has developed. His work is seen as the culmination of the Western metaphysical tradition by some and it is viewed

as the first step outside of that tradition by others. By critically examining the various interpretive appropriations of Nietzsche's text, we may gain some insights into the nature of hermeneutic inquiry and the interpretation-text relationship. The second way in which Nietzsche can be of assistance is through the consideration of Nietzsche's text as the exposition of a hermeneutic theory. The phenomenon of interpretation is a recurrent theme throughout Nietzsche's writings. Within his remarks on interpretation, a tension is present which anticipates the current dilemma of dogmatism and relativism facing hermeneutic theory. By examining Nietzsche's exposition of this tension, a possible solution to the current hermeneutic dilemma is suggested. It is this second issue, Nietzsche's approach to interpretation, which will be the subject of the following remarks.

Within Nietzsche's various comments on interpretation two central themes emerge. The first is his doctrine of perspectivism, which asserts that there are no uninterpreted facts. The positivistic notion of a "fact-in-itself" (objective Truth) is explicitly rejected by Nietzsche. Rather, there are only interpretations, that is, evaluations from a particular perspective in terms of one's being situated at a particular point in space, time and history. This doctrine of perspectivism has been characterized alternatively as paradoxical, nihilistic, and self-refuting. I would argue, however, that these judgments arise from a common misunderstanding of perspectivism, namely, that the doctrine of perspectivism is an ontological position. If, on the other hand, we understand perspectivism to be an "epistemological" position, one which delineates the limits of human perception and knowledge in providing a description of what we can "know" and not of what there "is," we can see that perspectivism is neither paradoxical, nihilistic, nor self-refuting.

When Nietzsche claims that there is no "true world" behind the world of appearances, he is not arguing for some sort of metaphysical idealism. Instead, he is rejecting the "Myth of the Beyond" that he finds at the essence of Christian morality as well as Platonic and Kantian metaphysics. Nietzsche's perspectivism does not question the existence of the world, but acknowledges that human perception and knowledge are limited: "We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made." (WP, 495)¹ This is not just a normative claim: it is an empirical conclusion regarding human finitude. There is no knowledge-in-itself, no Truth with a capital T; there are only truths and knowledge-for-us. "That things possess a constitution in themselves, quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity is a quite idle hypothesis . . . it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential;" (WP, 560) in other words, it

presupposes that our "knowledge" of a thing can be freed from our perception of it. Nietzsche rejects the "thing-in-itself," "meaning-in-itself," "facts-in-themselves" because we have no access to the in-itself, because the realm of the in-itself is an "idle hypothesis." For Nietzsche, at the bottom of every "what is that?" there always lies "what is that for me?" This is to say, we can only learn about the world from the questions that we ask, and all questioning is perspectival. As such, the answers that we receive will be perspectival as well. This is why there is "no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted," (WP, 600) and why also "There is no single correct interpretation." (Letter to C. Fuchs, August 26, 1888) There are, for all practical purposes, an infinite number of subjects and an infinite number of viewpoints. As a result, there are an infinite number of interpretations, that is, perspective valuations.

In apparent opposition to the relativistic doctrine of perspectivism, however, are Nietzsche's comments regarding philology or "the art of reading well." What Nietzsche means by "reading well," however, is not at all clear. On the one hand, reading well seems to imply some desire to maintain a sense of textual purity. The philologist's task is to devise rigorous methods for "the restoration and keeping pure of texts." He should be guided in this task by "the simple desire to comprehend what an author says." (HatH, 270) The worst readers, he says, are "those who act like plundering soldiers." (MOM, 137) In order to apply "their profound interpretations, they often alter the text to suit their purpose--or in other words, [they] corrupt the text." (WS, 17) On the other hand, Nietzsche both denies any authorial privilege regarding the determination of textual meaning while at the same time denying the fixed, closed character of that textual meaning. A poet, he writes, "is absolutely not an authority for the meaning of his lines." (Letter to C. Fuchs, August 26, 1888) The author is continually surprised "at the way in which his book, as soon as he has sent it out, continues to live a life of its own." (HatH, 208) Elsewhere he writes that "a book is made better by good readers." (MOM, 153) For Nietzsche, the text is essentially incomplete, and this incompleteness serves as an artistic stimulus and invitation to its audience. (cf HatH, 199, 178) The great author incites his audience to further investigation and places the demand on his readers to complete the work. There is much to be read in a text that is not actually written down, writes Nietzsche, and the good reader will be the one who has not yet "forgotten to think while reading a book: he still understands the secret of reading between the lines . . . [and reflecting back] upon what he has read." (FEI, Preface) The philologist thus finds him-

self in a precarious position: in his establishing a method of strict interpretation [strengen Erklärungs-kunst] with the intention of clearly understanding what the text means, he continually runs the risk of no longer suspecting what he should take for granted: the double and more than double sense of every text. (cf HATH, 8) As Nietzsche will later remark regarding the text of the world, "we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations." (GS, 374)

Given this danger of dogmatism inherent in the philological enterprise, how are we to interpret Nietzsche's remarks regarding philology as the art of reading well? The answer is provided, I think, in the prefaces which Nietzsche added in 1886-87 to his earlier published works. Here we are told what it means to read well: "slowly, profoundly, looking backward and forward, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes." (D, Preface, 5. Translation altered) The philologist is to be the teacher of slow reading, the teacher of reading as rumination (Wiederkauen) upon the text. Philology, Nietzsche tells us, teaches its adherents the leisurely art and expertise of goldsmithing applied to words. Like the goldsmith, who knows the limits of his material and yet who forges this raw material into ever-new and creative forms, so too the philologist knows the limits of the text, he knows when interpretation becomes violation and corruption and yet he can still work and re-work the text, forging ever-novel and creative meanings "between the lines."

By interpreting Nietzsche's doctrines of philology and perspectivism as I have suggested, it appears that a precursory difficulty to the contemporary hermeneutic dilemma of dogmatism and relativism is already inscribed within the Nietzschean text. This is to say, the perspectival claim that there is nothing other than interpretation appears irreconcilable with the philological presupposition that there is a text which is to be kept separate from the interpretations imposed on it. What remains to be considered is whether Nietzsche's two conflicting interpretive tendencies can be understood in such a way as to avoid the noxious consequences of both a dogmatic and unmitigated relativistic approach to interpretation.

An insight into this matter can be gained from Derrida's discussion of the two interpretations of interpretation in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."² Derrida writes of the two interpretations that the one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile," while the other calls for "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirma-

tion of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin which is offered to an active interpretation." For Derrida, these two interpretations of interpretation are irreducible and undecidable: neither can be reduced without remainder to a form of its opposite nor can we choose one mode of interpretation and dispense with the other. While Derrida labels the former interpretation as "Rousseauistic" and the latter as "Nietzschean," the preceding discussion of philology and perspectivism reveals both interpretations of interpretation to be found in Nietzsche's text. Nevertheless, this Derridean insight into the "undecidability" of the two interpretations of interpretation will be employed in the following elucidation of a Nietzschean approach to interpretation. By "undecidability," I take Derrida to mean that the "logic" of the two interpretations is not that of an "either . . . or . . ." but a "both . . . and . . ." This is to say, an approach to interpretation is not faced with an either/or choice between rigorous textual attentiveness or playful creativity. Nor is an interpretive methodology faced with the demand of reconciling these two competing interpretive tendencies in a synthesis or Aufhebung, thereby overcoming the conflict between them in a higher "unity." Rather, the Nietzschean approach will play between these two interpretive motifs, at once serious and playful, attentive and creative. "Ich bin ein Doppelgänger," Nietzsche writes in Ecce Homo, as a cryptic explanation of the multifarious character of his experiences and writings. In the same way, the interpreter of a text must be a Doppelgänger, with one eye turned toward philological rigour and the other recognizing the necessarily perspectival character of all "knowledge." By remaining attentive to both impulses, the interpreter can account for a multiplicity of possible interpretations while avoiding both a relativistic subjectivism and any sort of dogmatic absolutism. Nietzsche himself seems to be able to avoid both these alternatives: while maintaining that there is no single, correct interpretation, he circumvents the charge of subjectivism through his focusing on the character of existence as becoming. Although the doctrine of perspectivism asserts that there are no "facts" or things" but rather only interpretations, this is not to assert, however, that everything is subjective, for the subject itself is not something given but something invented and added to the process of interpretation. (cf WP, 481) "The subject is a created entity, a 'thing' like all others: a simplification with the object of defining the force which posits, invents, thinks, as distinct from all individual positing, inventing, thinking as such." (WP, 556) When Nietzsche writes, for example, that "One may not ask: 'who then interprets?'" (WP 556), it is because such a question already mislocates the interpretive process.

Likewise, one may not ask "what then is interpreted?" Interpretation is not grounded in either the subject or object; it exists as an active process in the between, in the space which separates them, and the attempt to focus the interpretive process in the direction of either the subject or the object will only serve to obscure the dynamics of this process. The idea of uninterpreted existence is for Nietzsche, non-sense (cf. GS, 374) and yet the origin of these interpretations is not some sort of substantial subject qua reservoir of prejudices and preconceptions. Interpretation is, rather, the fundamental "epistemological" process, to be conceived as the form of will to power and the creative and procreative impulse to life. In this context, philology as the art of reading well takes on a new significance. In The Antichrist, Nietzsche notes the theologians "incapacity for philology." Here reading well signifies "being able to read off a fact without falsifying it by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, subtlety in the desire for understanding. Philology as ephexis [undecisiveness] in interpretation." (AC, 52)

In other words, philology's task is to guard against teleological interpretations, i.e., those interpretations which are controlled by the desire to understand something for a specific purpose, as the priests have hitherto interpreted the world in such a way as to insure their own claims to power. Philology as ephexis (the etymological root of the phenomenological epoché) must keep the question of interpretation open, for there are countless possible interpretations and countless possible meanings which will fit a given text.

There is thus no question of choosing between philology and perspectivism, as both are required in the ever-ongoing process of interpretation. In fact, Nietzsche ultimately situates the interpretive process between the two moments of philology and perspectivism. The goal of this interpretive process will be a new "objectivity," one no longer understood as "contemplation without interest", which for Nietzsche is a "non-sensical absurdity . . . [grounded upon] the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject.'" Instead, this "future 'objectivity'" is defined as "the ability to control one's Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge . . . 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." (CM, Third Essay, 12) A plurality of interpretations is, for Nietzsche, a sign of

strength, and the master of interpretation or "grand stylist" will be he who can endure the greatest multiplicity of competing and contrary interpretations, that is to say, who can organize them into a meaningful whole which will enhance his life.

By focusing upon enhancement of life rather than objective Truth as the criterion for judging the value of an interpretation, Nietzsche's interpretive approach can account for the illegitimacy of certain interpretations while at the same time avoiding the positing of a single interpretation as the correct one. Again, this is not so much the result of a normative claim for Nietzsche as it is an empirical conclusion. He writes that "what is 'incorrect' can be ascertained in innumerable cases: what is correct, almost never." (Letter to C. Fuchs, August 26, 1888) In other words, it is experimentally and experientially possible to discover which interpretations are unhealthy: those that negate or inhibit the creative and procreative impulse to life, i.e., those that inhibit the will to power. And for this reason, these interpretations are to be deemed inappropriate, illegitimate, or "incorrect." On the other hand, the case is not so clearly decidable with respect to discerning those interpretations which are healthy, i.e., those interpretations which foster an increase in the will to power and thus enhance life. My point in this discussion, however, is not to weigh the relative merits and liabilities of health or life-enhancement as a criterion for the adjudication of interpretations. Rather, it is to show that by adopting such a criterion, Nietzsche can avoid the dilemma of choosing between dogmatism and relativism in his approach to interpretation. Insofar as health or life-enhancement is a situation-specific and variable standard, there can be no single correct interpretation which will enhance life or promote health for all interpreters and for all times, and Nietzsche can affirm health as a standard without thereby specifying a universally applicable criteriology for what is to count as healthy or life-enhancing. In so doing, Nietzsche allows for a proliferation of acceptable interpretations (thereby avoiding the dogmatic assertion of a single "correct" interpretation) while retaining a standard by which to distinguish "better" from "worse" interpretations (thus avoiding an empty relativism in which all interpretations are of equal value).

By way of conclusion, let me offer a metaphor which Nietzsche provides as a clue for understanding how a balance is to be achieved between the philological rigour which accounts for the "falsity" of some interpretations and the perspectivism which allows for the proliferation of a multiplicity of interpretations. In Human, All-Too-Human (Section 278), Nietzsche discusses the metaphor of dance. Dancing, he writes, is not merely the mechanical following of a pattern of steps.

Rather, the dancer must possess both strength and flexibility. He or she must follow the basic pattern of steps, but in following this pattern, the dance is created anew, in as fluid and as beautiful a form as the dancer is capable of creating. Similarly a good reading is not merely the rigorous apprehension of the meaning behind a text. Rather, it is an interpretation from a particular perspective, determined by the text to which the reader responds and by what the reader brings to the text in conjunction with the reader's capacity to create. A textual interpretation will be as strong and as supple, as creative and as appropriate as the interpreter is him- or herself. Interpretation cannot choose between the dogmatic assertion of one meaning and the relativistic acceptance of any meaning. Rather, interpretation must play between these two limits, both of which can function only as an end to the play. Nietzsche recognized these two alternatives as the limits between which the play of interpretation is operative, and as such, his hermeneutic approach situates itself between philology and perspectivism, in the between which links methodological rigour and creative appropriation.

NOTES

¹In the text, the following abbreviations of Nietzsche's works have been used. Arabic numerals following abbreviated titles refer to section numbers in Nietzsche's texts.

FEI: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions. Translated by J. M. Kennedy. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1910.

HatH: Human, All-Too-Human. Translated by Helen Zimmern. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911.

MOM: Mixed Opinions and Maxims. Translated by Paul V. Cohen. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911.

WS: The Wanderer and His Shadow. Translated by Paul V. Cohen. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911.

D: The Dawn of Day. Translated by J. M. Kennedy. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911.

GS: The Gay Science. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, Inc., 1974.

- GM: On the Genealogy of Morals. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, Inc., 1967.
- AC: The Antichrist. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Books, 1968.
- WP: The Will to Power. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, Inc., 1968.

²Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-93; passages cited appear on pp. 292-93.