Must We Choose between Real Nietzsche and Good Philosophy?
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When I began writing about Nietzsche, working within an Anglophone philosophy department, I found little to read about the methods and goals of the practice I was engaging in. This was very surprising to colleagues in other disciplines, for whom "methods" classes were standard fare. Within my discipline, conversely, pretty much nobody asked questions about methodology. Increasingly, this has become, to my mind, one of the greatest challenges facing philosophical Nietzsche scholarship: to give an account of itself. My guess is that a general and not too controversial account would be that we are exploring the productive tension between what the real Nietzsche wrote and what we take to be good philosophy. Some participants emphasize one element more than the other, but both must be present in some form: the practice is neither pure historicism, nor unconstrained, Nietzsche-independent philosophizing.

Is that account sufficient? Not yet. Two contributions to this symposium appear to agree that there is more to be done in this regard. I have argued, at length, that the one explicit methodological principle we often use, the principle of charity, is multiply ambiguous and perhaps deserving of suspicion ("'Some Third Thing': Nietzsche's Words and the Principle of Charity," Journal of Nietzsche Studies 47.2 [2016]: 287–302). Here, I outline two areas in which setting out our goals and methods seems particularly challenging: explaining how, first, text and, second, history ought to constrain our practice. Assuming everyone agrees that textual and historical factors do act as interpretative constraints, the question is: how? I set out a weak thesis that I hope will garner general agreement, and also a stronger, speculative thesis, for which I have some sympathy. The weak thesis is that we could do with better, more explicit rules for our game. Accordingly, I will suggest some rules we might adopt. Please treat them—and this contribution in general—as prompts for further discussion. I return to the strong thesis shortly.

First, a word on the constraints of "plain meaning." One of the earliest, relatively self-conscious forms of interpretative practice, Midrashic interpretation, uses the notion of peshat, usually translated as the "plain meaning" of the text—a notion that strikes me as helpful. This is not a matter of what was going on in the author's head. It is a matter of what the text says. When Nietzsche asks whether truth is a woman, the plain meaning of the term woman is clear enough. What on earth he is doing with that term is another matter, and attempting to say what he is doing will take you beyond plain meaning—which, I take it, is unobjectionable. But you would be violating plain meaning by reporting that Nietzsche asks us to suppose that truth is a man, or that philosophy is a woman. An initial ground rule might be:

• First Rule: Do not violate plain meaning!

This is far too vague and general. Ideally, I would like to see a taxonomy of different kinds of violations, so that we had agreed-upon terms we could use when discussing and reviewing each other's work. Here are some suggestions: The reader who is interested in plain meaning will be greatly aided by looking at text either side of the textual unit in question. The act of cutting out of context already has a name in nonphilosophical literature: contextomy. In Nietzsche's case, remarks on topics of particular philosophical interest may be scattered within claims about completely different matters. Often, a line without its context retains plain meaning. Sometimes it doesn't.

• Second Rule: Always give the gist of the aphorism as a whole before the quotation itself! So, generally avoid "Nietzsche writes that P," but, instead, say something like: "As part of the general claim that Q, Nietzsche writes, 'P.'" This would be a very helpful habit to get into, because it forces the interpreter to consider how the specific words relate to the overall aim of the text, while allowing her reader to do the same. The answer might be "not at all"; still, it would be worth knowing and saying.

We are all familiar with the experience of finding one passage in Nietzsche's texts that supports our claim and another that does not. What to do with the one that does not? Good practice, presumably, is to cite both, preferably explaining how the interpreter understands the disagreeable passage: that it is not as it appears, that it is unpublished, that it is atypical, or even, I have no idea! It would be bad practice to leave it to others to notice and, perhaps, to hope they don't. This misstep already has a name: cherry-picking. Effectively, the cherry-picker is not telling the whole truth. But suppose one finds one good passage—a "cherry." Surely one has a duty to look further, for text that supports it, or that points in a contrary direction? To do otherwise is not exactly cherry-picking, because the interpreter doesn't know that the passage isn't representative. Let's call it cherry-sticking: sticking with the cherry you have found. Cherry-sticking is bad because, while perhaps it tells the whole truth, it isn't the result of a genuine attempt to do so. Therefore:

• Third Rule: Seek out and list all of the disagreeable passages!

In an earlier article, I used the term misreporting to characterize a particular form that violation of plain meaning can and does take (Stern, "'Some Third Thing,'" 295–96). Nietzsche's words are quoted to make it sound as though he (plainly) meant something he certainly did not mean with those very same words. This is more specific than cherry-picking a passage, since a cherry-picked passage may nonetheless mean what it appears to mean— it's just that other passages oppose it. Thus, to use a simplistic example of misreporting: if I were to say "the sky is blue," a commentator would be misreporting

if she wrote, "Tom Stern claims that '[snow] is blue.'" Of course,
the first rule already proscribes misreporting, but we are trying to be more
specific. There are subspecies of misreporting. My simplistic example might
be an instance of "changing the subject" since the reader is misdirected
regarding the subject of the ascription: the commentator made it sound like
the subject of "is blue" was snow.

• Fourth Rule: Always state the text's subject, to make it clear
you haven't changed it! That includes benign cases. Thus, not
"Nietzsche says that X's 'are F,'" where there is no use of the
term X in the text in question, but rather, "Nietzsche says that
'Y's are F,' and he treats Y's as equivalent to X's, as the following
text demonstrates."

Another variety might be "not registering the register"; unlike " changing
the subject," this time Nietzsche does indeed utter the full sentence, but
also expresses doubt, or distance, places it within a rhetorical question, or
ascribes the thought to someone else. And so, a final rule:
• Fifth Rule: Always register the register! For instance, "In a
rhetorical question to which the answer appears to be 'yes' . . . ";
or, "As part of a micro-dialogue, the speaker who (I take it)
represents Nietzsche's view claims that. . . ."

Turning to the constraints of history, I begin with a general psychological
observation: often, the more historical and philological information we
have about an author, the smaller our freedom to maneuver when interpreting
the author's text. It is harder to explore what Nietzsche probably meant
by P and Q when you know that, the same year, Nietzsche read this book,
underlined that line with P and Q in it, and writes against a view expressed
in that book, using P, Q, and other words from the underlined passage. Of
course, historical background does not always afford such direct insights,
nor does it uniquely determine meaning; and Nietzsche often develops
the material he reads. Nor is the psychological observation I began with a
universal law. Sometimes, historical information expands the horizons of
philosophical meaning, and there are clear cases, within Nietzsche scholarship,
where it has fruitfully done so. But often, in Nietzsche's case, historical
facts do act as a constricting force on philosophical imagination. With
a good grasp of such historical facts, we find ourselves thinking, "Oh, it
would have been better if he had meant what I first thought he did . . . , but
he just didn't." If so, then in some cases the two goals of our practice—"real
Nietzsche" and "good philosophy"—look like they issue different instructions:
the more you want to produce good philosophy, the better you would
be advised to stay clear of learning about historical detail. But given that
history is a constraint, and given the enormous amount of excellent, readily
available historicist work on Nietzsche, what is our duty to history when we
interpret a passage?

Here is a weak duty: if we find a historical point that we can use, in it
goes; if someone else points out that we are saying something either anachronistic

or highly improbable, given the historical information available, then
we change our views accordingly. One worry here is that, if we merely adopt
this weak duty, history looks less like a constraint, and more like a garnish.

Another problem is that adopting the weak duty alone could convey the
misleading impression that historical context has been a constraint, that
the historical record has been more comprehensively and neutrally examined
than in fact it has. In effect, this would be historical cherry-picking or
cherry-sticking. On the other hand, it would be an impossibly strong duty
to seek out and state all relevant historical information when building an
argument. Not even historicist interpreters do that.

The weak duty is too minimal and the very strong duty is impossible,
but they aren't the only options, so it won't do to say that, because the latter
is impossible, the former is justified. One thing that lies in between is historicism
itself, which, though obviously philosophical, drops any commitment
to producing good philosophy. Ex hypothesi, that is not the practice
I describe. So how can you dip a toe into historicism, without falling into
the pond? Perhaps the idea is that no interpretation should be inconsistent
with a thorough, unbiased examination of the historical material. More
would need to be said in defense of this idea. However, if something like
it is tenable, then I have a tentative suggestion. The Nietzsche-Kommentar
series, insofar as it is currently available, offers page-by-page commentary
on sources, with references to relevant secondary literature. A minimal but
real historical constraint on our work would be to consult and be expected
to consult this commentary in relation to any passage upon which we are
building an interpretation.

The two constraints I have discussed, "plain meaning" and history, interact.
It is well known that historical information changes how we understand
the meanings of words. Again, not always, and not without discussion. But
you get the point. Historicist readings regularly conclude: when Nietzsche
writes P, he means that Q, without the modern-day connotations of P. If
we have a commitment to plain meaning, it would be odd to say: "I am
committed to working with what Nietzsche said and meant, but I prefer
to leave it to chance whether my interpretation relies on whatever nuances
and connotations have accidentally accrued since he died." More likely, our
commitment to plain meaning entails a commitment to plain meaning as
illuminated by the light of historical context.

Participants in many practices cannot give a clear account of their methods
and goals. Gym classes look fairly well defined in that regard. Other
practices are benignly undefined; they cannot tell you their aims and methods,
but it doesn't matter. Rambling, watching sport, doodling—take or
leave my examples, the point is that you can satisfactorily do certain things without giving a
good account of why or how. Conversely, some undefined
practices might be thought to suffer for that reason. Consider a churchgoer
who found that she couldn't give an account of her practice, but who found
that fact uncomfortable and therefore tried to give a better account. That

makes three kinds of practice: the well defined (gym classes), the benignly undefined (rambling), and malignly undefined (the churchgoer).
A fourth kind of practice is one that does not merely happen to lack a neat account of itself; rather, it really depends on not having such an account. If you really thought about what you were doing, that is, you wouldn't be able to do it, at least not in the same way. Specialists in German philosophy can hardly be unfamiliar with the idea that, for some Xs, thinking about X changes X. Sometimes it does so for the better. Sometimes, though, for the worse. The best tragedians, Nietzsche suggests, were producing plays "only by instinct." By asking too many reflective questions about tragedy, Socrates helped to kill it off. Let's call practices of this fourth kind misological, for want of a better term. On Nietzsche's view, tragedy is misological and worthwhile. In contrast, one could imagine that the breakdown of a practice, caused by self-reflection, might produce something better. When a practice has not yet given a clear account of itself, one cannot tell whether or not it is misological—whether it can look at its own expression in the mirror, without changing that expression. Do my rules reflect our norms? If not, what are the norms? Are my rules already common practice? If not, and if enacted, would philosophical Nietzsche scholarship produce very different Nietzsches? I do not know the answers to these questions. At the start, I noted that I have sympathy with a stronger thesis. Here it is: philosophical Nietzsche scholarship is misological. The discussion so far would be evidence for that, if (1) textual and historical constraints, as implicitly held by practitioners, produce explicit rules of the kind I spell out; and either (2) those rules are systematically breached in what we take to be good instances of the practice or (3) actually adhering to those rules would lead to historicism.

So far, I have talked about only one of the two poles of the practice, the "real Nietzsche" side, not the "good philosophy" side. I can imagine a response based on the latter: "As long as we state what we are doing, there can be no objection to a practice that produces good philosophy in Nietzsche's name." I am in favor of good philosophy. And I agree that it sounds difficult to object to interpreters who produce such a thing, while stating what they are doing, historically and textually. But I am assuming that, for us, text and history are constraints of some kind. Of what kind, exactly? It will not be enough to state that we don't merely reproduce the real, historical Nietzsche. I am challenging us to state exactly how we don't. Consider the following, rather vague instance of a "that-we-don't" statement: "The Nietzsche I present is a version of Nietzsche, perhaps not exactly what the real, historical man himself thought, but an interesting development of his ideas." Now compare this with a more specific "howwe-don't" statement, noting that, using my terminology, we can be more precise: "The Nietzsche I present here is probably not exactly what the real man, Nietzsche, thought, because I have used the techniques of textual and historical cherry-sticking and, in certain instances, cherry-picking. For example, I am fully aware that Nietzsche read three books on the topic of this paper, but I haven't read them. I aim to avoid 'changing the subject,' but I make a policy of not registering the register. Nonetheless, text and

history are constraints on my interpretation." I am not claiming that every, or any particular, piece of philosophical Nietzsche scholarship would merit a self-description of this exaggerated kind; my tentative rules reflect norms I expect us to endorse, not reject. But I am asking what our real, specific, accurate "how-" statements would look like and whether, if forced to spell them out in detail, they would match up with our norms.

Another response might be: "Consider S's Nietzsche! And T's Nietzsche! They probably didn't get Nietzsche right, whatever that is, but the world would be poorer without their philosophy." My world would be certainly be poorer, for many values of S and T. But it would be an interesting result if we came to think that S and T could not have produced their "good philosophy" had they themselves adhered more closely to the "real Nietzsche"–focused values that we like to think are implicit in our practice. If the interpretations we look up to, philosophically, needed to violate the norms we come explicitly to endorse interpretatively, then our situation is a peculiar one. Wouldn't something have to give?