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Nietzsche's Metaethics, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Appropriation

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by

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ABSTRACT

Certain contemporary Nietzsche scholars claim to have discovered Nietzsche's position on

metaethics through a careful reading and interpretation of his texts. Whose account is most

accurate? Unfortunately, Nietzsche's texts underdetermine his views on metaethics; we lack the

textual evidence to settle these debates decisively. Does this mean that the historical Nietzsche's

metaethical beliefs, ultimately inaccessable, are of little use to contemporary metaethical study?

Or instead, must metaethicists interested in Nietzsche fundamentally change how Nietzsche's

works are to be understood? While I present scholars who argue that Nietzsche's corpus as a

whole should be understood in radically different ways, I ultimately argue that we can avoid both

of the above questions if scholars working in the history of philosophy tradition pivot their focus

from attempting to offer a descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethical view and instead

embrace appropriation.

INDEX WORDS: Nietzsche, Metaethics, Methodology, History of philosophy, Fictionalism,
Constitutivism

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Cheryl, father, Kevin, and sister, Chloe, for sticking with me and giving me the motivation and support to finish.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations GM, BGE, HH, A, GS, EH, BT, TI, and WP denote the following works by Friedrich Nietzsche, respectively:

On the Genealogy of Morality. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.

Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Human, All Too Human. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Vol. II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

The Antichrist. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York City, New York: Viking, 1954.

The Gay Science. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York City, New York: Vintage, 1954.

Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are. Translated by Duncan Large. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

The Birth of Tragedy: and the Case of Wagner. Translated by William Haussmann. New York City, New York: Vintage, 1967.

Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. New York City, New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

The Will to Power. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York City, New York: Vintage, 1968.

1   INTRODUCTION

Some contemporary Nietzsche scholars claim to have discovered Nietzsche's position on

metaethics through a careful reading and interpretation of his texts. For example, Paul

Katsafanas argues that Nietzsche's metaethical view is best interpreted as a kind of

constitutivism. Nadeem Hussain disagrees, instead arguing that Nietzsche is a metaethical

fictionalist. Who is correct? Which metaethical view did Nietzsche really hold? Unfortunately

for both scholars, Nietzsche's texts underdetermine his views on metaethics. The result of textual

underdetermination is that a reader doesn't have enough information to adjudicate between its

potential interpretations. Whether this underdetermination was simply the result of our

contemporary moral issues not being Nietzsche's focus (perhaps such focus being impossible,

given the meaning of *contemporary*), or of Nietzsche's deliberately having written in a way that

complicates one's ability to pin a definitive position on him, Nietzsche's texts are, with respect

to metaethics, epistemically underdetermined. Instead of conclusively supporting the ascription

of any one particular metaethical view to Nietzsche, all the texts are able to justify is an

interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethics that is compatible with multiple *mutually exclusive*

metaethical theories. Therefore, no account of Nietzsche's metaethics that commits him to one or

another such theory is conclusively defensible.[1]

Does this mean that the historical Nietzsche's metaethical beliefs, ultimately

inaccessable, are of little use to contemporary metaethical study? Or instead, must metaethicists

interested in Nietzsche rethink how Nietzsche's works are to be understood? While I present

Alexander Nehamas and Anthony Adler as scholars who argue that Nietzsche's corpus as a

whole should be understood in radically different ways, I ultimately argue that we can avoid both

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[1] I do not argue that all descriptive interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics are equally defensible. Some
interpretations are clearly less supported by the text than others. But no single interpretation stands head and
shoulders above the rest.

of the above questions if scholars working in the history of philosophy pivot their focus from attempting to offer a descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethical view and instead embrace appropriation.

By *descriptive*, I refer to a group of goals connected by the aim of description. One scholar's descriptive goal may be to study historical *figures* in order to, as accurately as possible, construct an interpretation of what those figures *really* believed in relation to any one topic. Alternatively, a scholar may attempt to discover not what the author of a *text* means, but instead the message of a *character* in the text. Finally, a scholar could be concerned with what the text *itself* means; for our purposes, that might be what coherent metaethical account the text provides. This latter goal may be further separated: I may be interested in the *rhetorical* aims of the text, or any *one* argument extracted from the text, or the broader *context* of the work's message or received message by others at the time. Greater identification and specification of descriptive goals is undoubtedly possible. Yet all descriptive goals aim at a objective fact of the matter, a description of what a text really says regarding a topic, what an author really meant, etc. Descriptive goals are further unified by a focus on close readings of the text and contextual factors that historically situated, influenced, and limited the text and author. I argue that we are epistemically unjustified in assenting to a *best descriptive account* of Nietzsche's metaethics. Just as some scholars concede the impossibility of divining Socrates's *own* historical views from Plato's writings, so too ought we concede that impossibility when commenting on "Nietzsche's" metaethical view.[2] Furthermore, I argue against the possibility of constructing a best descriptive account of what the *text* claims regarding metaethics.

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[2] If a scholar adopts the descriptive goal of determining what a historical figure *really* thought, isn't the fact of that matter epistemically underdetermined *regardless* of who one studies, Nietzsche or otherwise? No; justification about what any X believes may be greater or weaker depending on available evidence. For instance, Martin Luther's words and deeds give good support for the claim that he believed many Catholic practices unsatisfactory. I am

By *appropriative*, I also bundle many related aims together, all of which see the text as a *tool* or means to something else.[3] For instance, the goal of studying historical figures and texts may essentially aim at contemporary benefit; one attempts *not* to create a most accurate reconstruction of a figure's view, but instead to present what one takes as most interesting, poignant, provocative, etc. from the text in a way that is fruitful to contemporary discussion. In this way, a scholar may present an *inspired* view without making a claim about descriptive textual facts or facts about an author's beliefs. Alternatively, one may undertake appropriation for the sake of further *creation*, instead of mere historical categorizing of past positions and authors.[4] If we accept that studying the history of philosophy is *philosophy*, we should note well Nietzsche's remarks on philosophy. For Nietzsche, "[Philosophy] always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the 'creation of the world,' to the *causa prima*" (BGE 9). The history of philosophy as philosophy is best suited to appropriation, by Nietzsche's own lights.[5] Certainly, when the text is epistemically underdetermined in relation to a topic, the appropriative approach appears fruitful.

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justified in assenting to that claim about this historical figure's belief despite not having first-person access to that figure's mental world. If Martin Luther's beliefs about Catholicism were underdetermined, we would not be justified in assenting to any positive claim made about those beliefs. Yet surely we have enough historical evidence to be justified in this case. On the other hand, Nietzsche's texts are epistemically underdetermined such that we are not justified in assenting to either a claim about what Nietzsche thought metaethically or which contemporary metaethical position Nietzsche's texts support.

[3] Some appropriative aims may first require or desire a descriptive account of the text as a prerequisite, yet I argue that we don't have enough justification for assenting to one descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethics over another. Therefore, appropriative aims that first require assent to a descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethics have no justifiable grounding. See Section V for a further discussion.

[4] One may appropriate both for contemporary benefit and as a creative, artistic endeavor, although the goals need not necessarily be pursued in tandem.

[5] Relatedly, Nietzsche remarks that "when we are awake we do the same thing as when we are dreaming: we first invent and create the people we are dealing with – and then forget it immediately" (BGE 138). Commentary on historical figures necessarily involves some degree of *inventing* them in order to interact with them at all. Scholars may *forget* that they perform this act of construction, just as we forget our dreams, but the construction occurs nevertheless, even if one is attempting to merely descriptively relate to a historical figure.

Note that, by appropriation, I do not mean misrepresentation, obfuscation, or hiding one's own view behind a famous figure. Other scholars *do* take appropriation to be *just* these undesirable things, and their criticism of such practices is warranted. Yet on my view, misrepresentation of an author's view is not *and cannot be* appropriation at all (and vice versa). In fact, it is a malicious *descriptive* endeavor. To claim that "Nietzsche believes X" is first of all a descriptive claim, and to state as much while knowing your claim is a misrepresentation is merely bad descriptive philosophy. Similarly, to hide one's own view in Nietzsche, or to pass off your own view as a proper interpretation of what Nietzsche said, is to claim as a descriptive fact that Nietzsche held the very view you are promoting. These are bad descriptive practices, not reasons to be critical of appropriation.

It might be fruitful to categorize a few examples according to the above dichotomy in order to clarify what I mean. Jonathan Bennett is a scholar who studies figures in the history of philosophy in order to extract true philosophical positions (Duncan 347). Bennett is uninterested in what Spinoza thought, for instance, instead being concerned with whether positions in Spinoza's text are true or false (Duncan 348). For evidence that Bennett approaches Spinoza in this way, see his remark that "from my standpoint, which is concerned not with Spinoza's mental biography but with getting his help in discovering philosophical truth, it would make no difference if he saw himself as an atheist" (Bennett 35). In order to make these judgments about truth-aptitude for the sake of contemporary philosophy, ultimately an appropriative goal, Duncan first makes claims about what arguments in the text are. This prerequisite task is descriptive. On the other hand, Daniel Garber "seeks to show how a thinker's views were reasonable given her historical context" (Duncan 370). This goal is descriptive given its focus on evaluating the beliefs scholars actually held. Yet Garber notes that a contemporary, appropriative benefit may

result from pursuing this goal as well (ibid.). Both scholars are committed to a descriptive goal and are also interested in an appropriative one.

I proceed as follows. First, I compare the textual support for Katsafanas's constitutivist and Hussain's fictionalist interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics. While it is not possible here to provide substantive remarks on *all* extant descriptive interpretations, I select Katsafanas's and Hussain's views as case studies of interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics because I find their arguments compelling, which only makes their mutual incompatibility more problematic. Second, I argue that while both scholars cite ample textual evidence for their interpretations, neither scholar can claim the conclusively superior interpretation of the text. I then discuss Nehamas and Adler, both scholars who claim that interpretive and meta-interpretive[6] issues can be resolved if we reevaluate what Nietzsche's works *are*. In assessing these radical views, I argue that scholars are best off adopting an appropriative goal when engaging with epistemically underdetermined texts in the history of philosophy. Favoring appropriation instead of description allows us to resolve this interpretive problem between Katsafanas and Hussain regarding Nietzsche's metaethics, and can perhaps be applied to interpretive stalemates of other texts underdetermined with respect to certain content as well.

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[6] By meta-interpretive, I just mean questions about how one can and should choose to assent to one interpretation over another. These are questions about how to justifiably select from among interpretations.

2   KATSAFANAS'S NIETZSCHE

Let us first review Katsafanas's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethical view. Katsafanas

argues that Nietzsche is a metaethical constitutivist. Constitutivism is a kind of metaethical

subjective realism according to which moral statements have truth values indexed to mind-

dependent properties of agents. Specifically, constitutivists claim that these mind-dependent

properties are "constitutive aims" of action (Katsafanas 2011: 630). [7] What is a constitutive aim?

Constitutive aims are aims that "generate *non-optional* standards of success" for performing

some action under discussion (Katsafanas 2011: 630). For example, Katsafanas explains that

trying to achieve checkmate is the constitutive aim of playing chess; one must aim at checkmate

in order to be playing chess at all (ibid.). However, constitutivists believe that there are

constitutive aims *of action simpliciter*, any action *at all*, as well. Whatever these constitutive

aims of action turn out to be, they produce standards for evaluating all actions. However, while

agents can simply stop playing chess to rid themselves of its constitutive standard, agents can't

stop acting as long as they are agents. Therefore, agents cannot avoid constitutive aims of

action.[8]

Katsafanas argues that Nietzsche holds the following three views, which appear

incompatible when held in tandem. First, Nietzsche denies that moral claims are objectively true

(Katsafanas 2011: 623). For example, Nietzsche claims that "there are absolutely no moral

phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena…" (BGE 108). Second, Nietzsche

claims that values are created. Nietzsche explains that "whatever has value in our world now

does not have value in itself, according to its nature – nature is always value-less, but has been

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[7] See Bagnoli (2021) 2.2 for a more in-depth discussion of constitutivism.
[8] "In the case of chess you can easily escape the standard: you can simply stop playing chess, and then the standard won't apply to you. But notice that action is crucially different: if action had a constitutive aim, you could escape the aim only if you could stop acting" (ibid.).

given value at some time, as a present – and it was we who gave and bestowed it" (GS 301).[9]

Finally, Katsafanas interprets Nietzsche as normatively privileging power (Katsafanas 2011:

623). In essence, Nietzsche claims that power[10] is good. Regarding "true philosophers," for

instance, Nietzsche explains that they "reach for the future with a creative hand and everything

that is and was becomes a means, a tool, a hammer for them. Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their

creating is a legislating, their will to truth is – *will to power*" (BGE 211). To provide some

context, Nietzsche earlier questioned the normative privilege of truth.[11] In contrasting the will to

truth with will to power, Katsafanas argues that Nietzsche implies that it is *power* that is in fact

good for the philosopher.[12] However, the claim that power is good, if the claim is objective,

seemingly contradicts Nietzsche's claim that there are no objective values. And has "power is

good" *always* been true, or did a philosopher *create* that value?

Katsafanas attempts to resolve the apparent incompatibility among these three claims by

arguing that Nietzsche believes power is "the constitutive aim of willing" (Katsafanas 2011:

634). Having power as an aim is part of what it is for humans to will at all. Note that this claim is

broad; it is supposed to apply to all humans regardless of *what* they will (Katsafanas 2011: 631).

In other words, the *aim* of any willing action is power, despite whatever *object* one may happen

to will. While I now will to finish this paper, for instance, the goal of that action is power. Even

life-denying followers of the ascetic ideal "would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will" (GM III:

1, 28). In other words, Nietzsche argues for a necessity claim and a constitution claim. All

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[9] See also BGE 211, where Nietzsche says that the philosopher's task "calls for [the philosopher] to *create values*."
[10] Power here is to be understood as seeking and overcoming resistance, which is an interpretation first defended by Bernard Reginster (Katsafanas 2011: 632-33, Reginster 2009).
[11] Nietzsche seemingly questions both the value of truth *itself* and the value of the *will* to truth. "From the very moment that faith in the God of the ascetic ideal is denied, *there is a new problem as well*: that of the *value* of truth. – The will to truth needs a critique – let us define our own task with this –, the value of truth is tentatively to be *called into question* . . ." (GM III:24). See also BGE 1.
[12] Another passage that Katsafanas thinks supports this reading is, ''what is good? Everything that heightens in human beings the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself'' (A 2).

humans necessarily will, and power (or aiming at power) at least partially constitutes what willing *is*.

Note that Katsafanas makes use of the idea that constitutive aims of action are *inescapable* for agents. "The values arising from our agential nature cannot be reassessed or altered; as the prior sections have argued, we are inescapably committed to valuing power" (Katsafanas 2011: 648). This conclusion makes compatible all three of Nietzsche's claims above. Power is normatively privileged because all humans implicitly value it insofar as they value willing, and all humans must will. And the value of power is also "created" by us insofar as "it arises from the fact that our actions have a certain structure" (Katsafanas 2011: 635). The claim *power is valuable* need not be objectively true for the previous two claims to be true – according to subjective realist metaethical theories like constitutivism, it isn't (Katsafanas 2011: 634-35).

In sum, Katsafanas provides plausible textual support for his interpretation of Nietzsche as a metaethical constitutivist. Barring competing interpretations, it appears that Nietzsche's numerous and seemingly-contradictory metaethical claims can be made coherent if Nietzsche is taken to be a constitutivist. However, in what follows, I explain that Hussain's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethical view *also* has plausible textual support.

3   HUSSAIN'S NIETZSCHE

Hussain interprets Nietzsche as a revolutionary moral fictionalist.[13] Because revolutionary

fictionalism is simply one claim removed from error theory, summarizing error theory first will

be beneficial. Error theory is the metaethical view that (1) the content of moral statements is

truth-apt. In other words, moral claims are true or false. These moral claims are also categorical,

objective, and prescriptive in that they apply to everyone regardless of individual aims, are made

true by mind-independent facts, and prescribe action. Secondly, error theorists claim that (2)

there are no facts that satisfy the previous desiderata; there are no moral facts, so all moral claims

are false (Mackie 1990).[14] Revolutionary fictionalists agree with error theorists that presently,

moral statements are false. Yet revolutionary fictionalists go further than error theorists in that

these fictionalists prescribe action – for prudential reasons, we ought act *as if* some moral claims

are true, even though we know they are not.

Such is the view Hussain ascribes to Nietzsche (Hussain 2012: 112). Just like Katsafanas,

Hussain begins his interpretation of Nietzsche by presenting "an interpretive puzzle" – various

claims Nietzsche makes that appear to be in contradiction.[15] First is the idea that free spirits

create values. Hussain also recognizes that this claim is in tension with Nietzsche's claim that

"there do not seem to be any values" (Hussain 2007: 165). Hussain presents one potential

solution to this dilemma, which is that Nietzsche might be calling upon free spirits to create *false*

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[13] Note that Hussain simply uses the term *fictionalism*, not revolutionary fictionalism. But it is clear that Hussain means to say that Nietzsche is a revolutionary fictionalist as opposed to a hermeneutic fictionalist. While hermeneutic fictionalists believe that individuals *already* recognize that their moral claims are false, revolutionary fictionalists do not. Instead, they argue that people *should* recognize that their moral claims are false while they continue to make assertions about morality. Hermeneutic fictionalism is a descriptive position, while revolutionary fictionalism is a normative one. See van Roojen 177 for a more detailed discussion of this distinction.
[14] Also see Joyce 3.2 for a more detailed discussion of error theory.
[15] It is interesting to note this methodological similarity between authors. They both share the common assumptions that Nietzsche is a philosopher of positions and affirms the law of noncontradiction, which is why potentially contradictory passages appear as a "puzzle" the authors hope to solve. While I will later discuss scholars who argue that making these assumptions is a *mistake*, I instead argue that we are not justified in choosing one interpretation over another.

values (ibid.). But this solution is unsatisfactory, Hussain claims, due to the idea that free spirits

are supposed to "face up to the truth" (Hussain 2007: 159). For Nietzsche asks, "how much truth

does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*? More and more that becomes for me the real

measure of value" (EH P:3). Because higher men and free spirits are individuals of high value on

Nietzsche's account, and individuals of high value are able to "endure" and "'incorporate' truth

in their lives," these free spirits ought be able to endure the truth (Hussain 2007: 159).[16]

Therefore, a straightforward, contemporary version of revolutionary fictionalism inadequately

captures Nietzsche's view.

Hussain attempts to solve this interpretive dilemma by reference to Nietzsche's

comments on art and value. Nietzsche makes many comments in support of artistic value, even

in the context of nihilism. For instance, Nietzsche claims that "the existence of the world is only

justified as an aesthetic phenomenon" (BT 5). Nietzsche also claims that poets and artists provide

an example for how to best live when we recognize the lack of objective values in the world.[17]

Hussain captures the applicability of Nietzsche's comments on art to this interpretive puzzle by

claiming that "art understands that its illusions are illusions without the illusions themselves

being undermined" (Hussain 2007: 169).[18] In the same way, Hussain interprets Nietzsche not

merely as calling on us to believe that values exist while simultaneously knowing they do not,

but instead to create "honest illusions" of value (Hussain 2007: 166). The key here is not to talk

about simultaneously *believing* while *not believing*, but instead to take something as valuable as

a *pretense* while knowing it is not (Hussain 2007: 170). Thus, Hussain solves an interpretive

dilemma regarding Nietzsche's metaethics by ascribing to him a novel revolutionary fictionalism

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[16] Hussain equates free spirits and higher men (Hussain 2007: 158).
[17] See HH I:33, GS 107, 299.
[18] And art*ists* are able to suppress the will to truth Nietzsche questioned above (Hussain 2007: 171).

with textual support. Central to this account is the prescription to adopt the attitude of artists, who value their artwork while nevertheless disbelieving in their art's objective value.

4   UNDERDETERMINATION

I want to make clear that both Hussain and Katsafanas *explicitly* endorse descriptive goals for their interpretations. For example, Katsafanas's claims his interpretation is "Nietzsche's view," and that "Nietzsche has a powerful argument for constitutivism" (Katsafanas 2011: 621). And by using language like "this is what Nietzsche means by 'will to power'," Katsafanas reveals that he is making claims not merely about what the *text* supports (which would still be a descriptive goal), but what Nietzsche *himself* meant by the text (ibid.). Hussain similarly takes his interpretation to be a descriptive account of Nietzsche's position. He writes, "I will take such textual evidence to be sufficient to ascribe to Nietzsche an error theory about moral claims" (Hussain 2007: 159). Hussain elsewhere uses phrases like "Nietzsche clearly thinks that…" and "I am ascribing to Nietzsche…" (Hussain 2007: 170, 179). In summary, both Katsafanas and Hussain claim that their interpretations accurately reflect what Nietzsche really believed about metaethics. With their interpretations understood, let me now argue for why neither interpretation can be assented to as a best descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethics.

Both Katsafanas's and Hussain's interpretations are plausible and have textual support. However, their accounts are incompatible, and we know two mutually exclusive interpretations cannot both be true. In this section, I first present passages and ideas that the authors take as *conclusive* proof for the truth of their view, yet are in fact merely *consistent* with their view. Often, Katsafanas and Hussain use the *same* idea from similar or identical passages to provide this support; as the authors both plausibly interpret these passages, the claim that the passages offer conclusive proof for either view is further undermined. Afterwards, I present a few challenges to both views from myself and other authors. Through focusing on these passages and interpretive challenges, I show that neither account can be said to be the best descriptive account

of Nietzsche's metaethics when considering his corpus as a whole; these two accounts are examples of strong interpretations that, nevertheless, we cannot justify deciding between.

First, both authors present sections of Nietzsche's works that, while being *plausibly* interpreted in line with the view each author is arguing for, do not *conclusively* support those views. An example of this kind of passage, which is consistent with but does not definitively settle Katsafanas's view, is when Nietzsche asks, "What is good? Everything that heightens in human beings the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself" (A 2). While this passage is not inconsistent with Katsafanas's interpretation that "power has a privileged normative status," Katsafanas overstates the passage's meaning when he extracts the claim that "[power] is the one value in terms of which all other values are to be assessed" (Katsafanas 2011: 623). This claim is an overstatement because it is unclear whether, in light of the context, Nietzsche's comment on power here should be taken rhetorically or ironically instead of straightforwardly as Katsafanas does.[19]

Furthermore, the above passage's relationship to *other* instances where Nietzsche discusses values is unclear. How do the "unassuming, selfless, modest, brave, full of self-overcoming, full of dedication, very grateful, very patient, very accommodating" virtues of "men of 'historical sense'" relate to power (BGE 224)? Should the value self-overcoming, for instance, be assessed in terms of power, in the sense that self-overcoming is not in fact valuable if it conflicts with power? While Katsafanas endorses this structure of prioritizing power when weighing values against each other, Nietzsche provides no explicit answer (Katsafanas 2011: 648).

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[19] I do not mean to imply that Nietzsche's comment on power here *is* rhetorical. *My* question is not a rhetorical one. The tone of Nietzsche's comment is unclear.

Next, both authors cite passages on moral skepticism as evidence for their views. First, Hussain cites Nietzsche's claim that "there are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena--more precisely, a misinterpretation" (TI, 'Improvers', 1). On this passage, Hussain states that he "will take such textual evidence to be sufficient to ascribe to Nietzsche an error theory about moral claims" (Hussain 2007: 159). While the passage is consistent with error theory, calling it *sufficient* evidence for the judgment that Nietzsche was an error theorist overstates the case. Hussain's claim is an overstatement simply because Katsafanas uses a similar point from Nietzsche to argue in a plausible way for an interpretation *other than* error theory (or fictionalism). Specifically, Katsafanas uses the aphorism, "there are absolutely no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena," to show that Nietzsche didn't believe that power was an objective value (BGE 108, Katsafanas 2011: 635). Katsafanas continues by explaining that power can still be valuable despite that value not being *objective* (Katsafanas 2011: 635). In both authors' passages, we see the same theme: Nietzsche is skeptical about the existence of moral facts. Given that the contents in these passages are used as plausible support by both authors, they are unhelpful to readers attempting to discriminate between the two views.[20]

Similarly, both authors interpret similar passages regarding value creation as evidence for his view. For instance, Katsafanas selects the passage, "whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature – nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time, as a present – and it was we who gave and bestowed it," to lend support to the value-creation component of constitutivism, since he takes it to show that "the

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[20] For example, if premise P is used to arrive both at conclusions C and ~C in separate arguments, then an analysis of premise P is unhelpful in determining which conclusion is true.

value of power is created by us" (GS 301, Katsafanas 2011: 623-24, 635). However, Hussain *also* selects passages where Nietzsche discusses this point in order to support his interpretation (Hussain 2007: 158). Hussain focuses on Nietzsche's discussion of "new philosophers… who are strong and original enough to give impetus to opposed valuations and initiate a revaluation and reversal of 'eternal values'" (BGE 203, Hussain 2007: 158). Hussain also quotes Nietzsche's description of the philosopher's task as "call[ing] for him to *create values*" (BGE 211, Hussain 2007: 158). These passages are interchangeable with one another for the purposes of each author's argument. Given that both authors plausibly consider these passages as evidence for their interpretation, the passages can't help us adjudicate between views. We would need further, more decisive textual support to do so.

Finally, both Katsafanas's and Hussain's interpretations face more direct challenges. I don't argue that the challenges *defeat* either interpretation. Instead, interpretive challenges cast doubt on the adequacy of these interpretations and make it even more difficult for a reader to assent to one interpretation or another. I first discuss direct challenges to Katsafanas's interpretation. To begin, there are instances where Nietzsche's claims give greater support to an anti-realist interpretation than to Katsafanas's. While Katsafanas's account is compatible with "Nietzsche… not hav[ing] to rely on the idea that power is an objective value," Katsafanas's account still attributes to Nietzsche the claim that some moral claims are true (merely subjectively true) (Katsafanas 2011: 634). However, Nietzsche's claim that "there are absolutely no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena" invites the interpretation that there are no moral facts, objective *or subjective* (BGE 108).[21]

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[21] Hussain raises a related worry about subjectivist realist views such as constitutivism being attributed to Nietzsche. Hussain claims that Nietzsche believes that "all evaluative judgments involve some kind of mistake *necessarily*" (Hussain 2007: 162). The judgment that power ought be valued due to its constituting willing, and willing being

Furthermore, Katsafanas's account of power as the constitutive aim of willing, i.e., that all willing necessarily involves willing power such that part of what it means to will is to will power, faces other challenges in the recent literature. Brian Leiter explains that "Nietzsche repeatedly makes claims inconsistent with the thesis that 'the essence of life' is will to power" (Leiter 2014: 114). For example, Nietzsche remarks that "where the will to power is lacking there is decline" (A 6). Leiter explains that agents couldn't be *lacking* in will to power if aiming at power is constitutive of willing and essential to living (Leiter 2014: 115).[22] This result is inconsistent with the interpretation that Nietzsche believed power to be constitutive of willing.

Again, I am not arguing that these interpretive challenges decisively invalidate Katsafanas's interpretation. Decisiveness is actually the entire issue. Katsafanas's account is neither wholly convincing nor wholly dismissible. While Katsafanas concedes that, "of course, Nietzsche uses different terminology" than the kind contemporary scholars use when explaining constitutivism today, Nietzsche also doesn't use an argumentative *structure*[23] in defense of constitutivism that one would expect (Katsafanas 2011: 631).[24] And the structure of Nietzsche's constitutivist claims Katsafanas presents is at least open to the few criticisms above. Still, Katsafanas's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethics should not be dismissed in response to these few challenges alone. While all interpretations of historical figures' views face some degree of questioning or challenges, their *existence* doesn't entail that all interpretations must be

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necessary for us agents, is one such misguided evaluative judgment. "'The falsity of human [evaluative] judgments,' says Nietzsche, occurs with 'absolute necessity'" (ibid., quoting HH I: 32).

[22] This is true as long as "lacking" is taken to mean *absent* as opposed to something like *weak*. Looking at the German *fehlen* lends credence to the former interpretation, as it means missing, lacking, or absent.

[23] By this, I mean that Nietzsche doesn't lay out his claims in a way that someone defending the truth of constitutivism, or any metaethical view, would be expected to. However, this expectation may be seen as anachronistic.

[24] A related worry is whether ascribing either constitutivism or revolutionary fictionalism to Nietzsche is anachronistic. In other words, one may believe that one errs in attributing a contemporary metaethical theory to a historical figure. Hussain takes up and attempts to defend his account against anachronism by reference to extant fictionalist ideas in literature in Nietzsche's time period (Hussain 2007: 178-87).

dismissed. Instead, interpretive challenges, based on the severity and amount of criticism, make readers less justified in assenting to Katsafanas's view than when they were not aware of such challenges. I present these worries now only to make readers more cautious in assenting to Katsafanas's interpretation over Hussain's. Unfortunately, the same difficulty applies to Hussain's account as well, which I now turn to.

First, Hussain cites Nietzsche's claim that the "Greeks were superficial – out of profundity" in order to show that Nietzsche thought some groups deliberately held false values (Hussain 2007: 171, quoting GS P: 4). Hussain explains that the passage exemplifies Nietzsche's commitment to moral fictionalism because the Greeks "prevent[ed] the drive to knowledge, 'the will to truth,' from becoming so dominant" (Hussain 2007: 171). In other words, the Greeks did not believe the pursuit of truth was the highest good – a valuation Nietzsche questions as well (BGE 1). We could express the moral view of the Greeks by saying, "Tirelessly searching after truth is not conductive to flourishing." The important point here is that the Greeks, while perhaps believing truth itself not to be the most worthwhile pursuit, believed that *their value, as expressed above*, i.e. that tirelessly pursuing the truth was detrimental to flourishing, was itself true. This passage does not show that the Greeks believed *insincerely* that flourishing was more important than truth as a revolutionary moral fictionalist would.

Hussain uses another passage, regarding honesty and art, as an example of Nietzsche describing a moral fictionalist-like commitment to values (Hussain 2007: 172). But this passage merely describes the same master values held by the Greeks that were described above, just worded differently. A complete commitment to "honesty would lead to nausea and suicide" (Hussain 2007: 172, quoting GS: 107). The proposition that truth isn't as valuable or as good as something else for human flourishing is itself believed to be true. The proposition is never held

and simultaneously believed false. It is instead another value, truth as an objective good, which is deemed false.

Next, Hussain claims that Nietzsche believes that artists are worth emulating in order to overcome nihilism; their ability to value illusions makes artists good candidates for opposing the ascetic ideal (Hussain 2007: 169). However, artists *aren't* good examples of individuals going against the ascetic ideal,[25] because artists are easily corrupted by it (GM III: 25). Artists can't help us combat the ascetic ideal because they don't stand for anything outside of their ascetic society (GM III: 5). And when Nietzsche questions what the ascetic ideal even *means*, he states that artists

> are far from standing independently enough in the world and *against* the world for their valuations and the changes in these to deserve interests *in themselves*! In all ages they have been valets of a morality or philosophy or religion; quite apart from the fact that, unfortunately, they have often enough been the all-too-pliant courtiers of their disciples and patrons, and flatterers with a good nose for old or newly rising powers. At the very least they always need a protective armor, a backing, a previously established authority: artists never stand by themselves. (ibid.)

In other words, artists aren't good candidates for helping us to gain clarity about either the ascetic ideal or its potential opposite. According to Nietzsche, artists are merely "valets" or mirrors for the views of the society they are a part of.

Thus concludes a brief canvass of the textual difficulties of both interpretations. Neither interpretation, it seems, is a definitive "match" to the text. A similar conclusion is shared by Andrew Huddleston, who argues that

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[25] The ascetic ideal is ultimately a nihilistic ideal (GM I:12, III: 14).

[Nietzsche's] thoughts on these topics do not amount to a clear position. While one can
certainly seek to develop a meta-axiology [or metaethics] *in a Nietzschean spirit*, where
the goal is simply to come up with something philosophically respectable and interesting
that is not incompatible with what Nietzsche says and is inspired to some degree by what
he does say, my project here is more historical and exegetical in character. If we stick to
what Nietzsche *himself* actually says about the standing of values, we see that it is quite
sketchy and does not strongly support the sorts of complex positions that have been
attributed to him. The evidence is just too thin." (Huddleston 23)

I agree that the evidence is too thin, for example when Katsafanas and Hussain at times claim
that passages *secure* an aspect of their interpretation which the passage is in fact only *consistent*
with. Yet I do credit both Katsafanas's and Hussain's interpretations as textually supported,
internally consistent, and philosophically interesting. The issue is that they're mutually
exclusive, and I argue that we lack the justification *to choose* one over the other -- I do not mean
to argue that *they are not justified*. In other words, when I discuss *justification*, I don't mean the
internal justification of the arguments themselves. Instead, I argue that *we* are not warranted in
assent to one over the other. Not only are *consistent* passages taken as *definitive* support of a
view, but other passages are claimed as support by *both* authors, and still other passages raise
challenges for either interpretation. While I disagree with Huddleston that no interpretation is
strongly supported, I agree that textual underdetermination results in an inability to choose
between these competing interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics.

  Before moving on, I want to mention four more features of the underdetermination at
hand. First, I am not claiming that any one of Nietzsche's texts is underdetermined *simpliciter*. In
general, passages are rarely underdetermined with respect to *all* topics. Even when one cannot

discern what Nietzsche, or Zarathustra, or a passage itself has to say *on metaethics*, one can typically positively identify *something* said. This fact places constraints on appropriation, the alternative I offer in Section VI; there are always some descriptive facts that one should attempt to get right. Conversely, every passage is underdetermined with respect to *some* topic. We aren't going to be able to figure out Nietzsche's favorite ice cream flavor, no matter how many writings we scour. I claim merely that Nietzsche's texts are underdetermined with respect to *metaethics*.

Second, I should comment on whether this underdetermination problem is a unique consequence of something about *Nietzsche's* writing style or content, or Nietzsche only provides *examples* of a phenomenon which may well describe other historical figures' works as well. Here, I take Nietzsche's work as an extended case study to demonstrate our lack of justification when assenting to a descriptive interpretation of an underdetermined passage. Yet Nietzsche's texts are unique in that they appear to be broadly underdetermined with respect to many topics. I do not have the space here, of course, to defend the claim that Nietzsche's texts are underdetermined with respect to anything except metaethics. It is nevertheless interesting to note that there is still broad interpretive disagreement regarding *many* Nietzschean concepts such as the will to power, eternal return, and overman, as well as any potential ontological or normative moral views Nietzsche's texts may support.

Third, while I do not inquire into *why* Nietzsche's texts underdetermine descriptive interpretations of certain positions here, other scholars have. For example, Bernard Williams writes that "with Nietzsche… the resistance to the continuation of philosophy by ordinary means is built into the text, which is booby-trapped, not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory. His writing achieves this partly by its choice of subject-matter, partly by its manner and the attitudes it expresses.

These features stand against a mere exegesis of Nietzsche, or the incorporation of Nietzsche into the history of philosophy as a source of theories" (Williams 1994: 240-241). I also do not argue that Nietzsche was inconsistent or contradictory.[26] Just as I argue that one is not justified in ascribing a positive metaethical view to Nietzsche, so too would one be unjustified in claiming that Nietzsche held *no* metaethical view. With these clarifications about underdetermination made, let us now discuss potential alternatives to providing a descriptive interpretation of textually underdetermined concepts.

Fourth, one may wonder why I have constructed this interpretive disagreement between Katsafanas and Hussain as a binary. For isn't there a third option? What if Nietzsche's true, descriptive view on metaethics was a *negative* one? Certainly, Nietzsche often remarks that the scholarly systematizing enterprise as a whole is misguided, that the will to truth above all else is sickly, etc. Perhaps we can't decide on a best interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethical view because he didn't have one. One may argue that there is stronger textual support for this descriptive interpretation than the two surveyed above. However, I think that this option cannot be correct. For how much Nietzsche talks of revaluing values and creating new ones, such talk can only be made comprehensible to oneself if one holds some beliefs about what values are, how objects and actions gain and lose value, if values are objective in the world, and other *metaethical* questions. Nietzsche owes both us and himself a metaethical view. The issue I highlight here is that we are unable to justify assent to any one as Nietzsche's.

This is not to say, as Hussain does, that "the interpretive task currently facing us is one of deciding which metaethical position, if any, fits best with Nietzsche's texts" (Hussain 2012: 112). Hussain's comment appears grossly specific if *us* is taken to mean *Nietzsche scholars in the history of philosophy as a whole*, as Nietzsche scholars face many and various interpretive

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[26] See Derrida 7 for the contrary view that "there is no one truth to Nietzsche or to Nietzsche's text."

tasks.[27] Yet I am not opposed to Hussain's stated task in itself. If one is truly able to decide

which metaethical position best fits with Nietzsche's comments, or better yet, which view he

actually believed, that understanding would provide an interpretive framework for much of what

Nietzsche says about value. The real issue I take with Hussain's comment is his implicit *forcing*

of a goal *upon* us. When Hussain states that this *is* the task for Nietzsche's scholars, he implies

that this *should be* the task for Nietzsche scholars. But I don't think that is true. My entire

argument in this paper is conditional – it rests upon the fact that Katsafanas and Hussain took up

descriptive tasks *for themselves*. I do not argue that they *should be* attempting to provide a best

descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethics; they *are* attempting to provide that account. The

interpretive tasks currently facing *us* are beyond number. Scholars take up these tasks for any

number of reasons: the task interests them the most, or seems valuable for the present world, or

strengthens their CV. I do not endorse prescribing goals onto others as Hussian appears to do.

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[27] There also might be a difference between *fitting* a metaethical position *to* Nietzsche and figuring out which metaethical position Nietzsche *really* had, although this difference is somewhat unclear. One might be tempted to say that the former merely requires *consistency* between Nietzsche and the view, but Hussain explicitly rules this out (ibid.).

5   RADICAL ALTERNATIVES

I have demonstrated that we are not fully justified in making a choice between Katsafanas's constitutivist and Hussain's fictionalist interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics based on the support available in the primary texts. The text underdetermines which of these two views, if either, Nietzsche held. If scholars are trying to draw justifiable conclusions about the text, this underdetermination is unsatisfying; one ought not be satisfied with their interpretation of a text once they realize that their interpretation is just one of many similarly-justified yet mutually exclusive interpretations. This fact alone makes every interpretation[28] of Nietzsche's metaethics less appealing; one becomes less justified in holding an interpretation when one appreciate these facts about the text.

So what is the alternative? Is the historical Nietzsche of no use to contemporary metaethical study? Not necessarily; Nietzsche's works obviously still retain great value even if a best account of Nietzsche's metaethics cannot be reconstructed. Instead of foregoing discussion of the hisotircal Nietzsche's metaethics in the history of philosophy, certain Nietzsche scholars offer radical alternatives. By *radical alternatives*, I mean that these scholars argue that we should change how we approach the texts as a *whole*, including but not limited to texts descriptively underdetermined regarding certain content. In other words, the following proposals argue for a holistic or all-encompassing re-appraisal of Nietzsche's project. While I do not endorse these positions, it will be useful to explain what they are and their potential benefits in order to frame

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[28] One may object that I have merely shown that we are unjustified in assenting to either one of *two* interpretations, but it is only if *all* interpretations are underdetermined that the text be conclusively shown to be underdetermined. Certainly, it is possible that an unknown or future interpretation will prove uniquely compelling and worthy of assent; my assessment of extant interpretations is necessarily historically bounded. I am also unable to provide an exhaustive survey of all extant competing views. However, I have selected Katsafanas's and Hussain's interpretations as representative samples of well-defended and compelling current interpretations. I believe these are examples of some of the strongest contemporary interpretations such that, if we are not justified in assenting to one of *these* interpretations, it is likely that we are even *less* justified in assenting to any of the less well-defended views.

my own position in between them and those who attempt to construct a descriptive best account of Nietzsche's metaethics. As examples of scholars who propose fundamental reevaluations of Nietzsche's project, I discuss Alexander Nehamas's conception of Nietzsche's works as *literary* and Anthony Adler's conception of Nietzsche's works as an *event*.

First, Nehamas begins his discussion of Nietzsche by announcing his plan to resolve paradoxes within Nietzsche's works, just as Katsafanas and Hussain do (Nehamas 1). For example, how can Nietzsche present "at least apparently paradoxical [claims as] true" while also holding "that all views are only interpretations" (Nehamas 2)? Nehamas suggests not only that there is difficulty in interpreting Nietzsche's claims in a way that makes them consistent, but also that there is difficulty *choosing between* any two interpretations of Nietzsche, given that "every interpretation creates its own facts" (ibid.). Nehamas attempts to resolve these interpretive issues not merely by providing his own interpretations of the eternal return, will to power, etc., but also by arguing that scholars should understand what Nietzsche's works *are* in an altogether new way. Specifically, Nehamas argues that Nietzsche should be interpreted as a figure who took his life, and life in general, as *literary*. To describe something as literary means that it "can be interpreted equally well in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways. Nietzsche, to whom this currently popular idea can in fact be traced, also holds that exactly the same is true of the world itself and all the things within it. This view, as we shall see, motivates his perspectivism as well as… his objections to morality" (Nehamas 3). Nietzsche's view of the world as literary implies that *Nietzsche's works themselves* should be understood in a literary way, as his works

are a part of the world.[29] The recognition that Nietzsche's works are literary means that, of

multiple mutually exclusive interpretations of those works, one can be just as good as another.[30]

Not only can we interpret the world in various mutually exclusive ways for various

purposes, given the literary nature of the world, but we can also interpret *ourselves*.[31] Nietzsche

demonstrates this when he claims that GM III is an interpretation of his own aphorism from *Thus*

Spoke Zarathustra (GM P: 8). In this passage in the preface, Nietzsche reveals both the

legitimacy of self-interpretation and the extreme variance of interpretive possibility. By variance

of interpretive possibility, I mean that it is unlikely that anyone else would have interpreted this

aphorism in the way Nietzsche purports to do so throughout GM III (without any further

reference to the aphorism itself and without ever directly discussing the content of the aphorism).

Nietzsche's self-interpretation was wielded as a tool for his own ends (a criticism of the ascetic

ideal). Yet, on Nehamas's reading, Nietzsche makes no claims about his interpretation being *the*

sole possible interpretation. Instead, he describes interpretation as "an *art*… which these days

has been unlearned better than anything else" (ibid.).

Nehamas further explains why multiple mutually exclusive interpretations of a literary

work can be valid by discussing the necessary relationship between *creativity* and interpretation:

"Nietzsche's views, whatever they are, are not simply there, available for inspection. In order to

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[29] "Nietzsche's model for the world, for objects, and for people turns out to be the literary text and its components" (Nehamas 91).

[30] Note that this claim does not entail that *all* interpretations are equally good. "We can still ask and decide whether some specific interpretation of Nietzsche is better than another, just as we can decide that Tennyson's version of Odysseus is a trifle compared to Homer's. We must keep resisting, in this context too, the assumption that Nietzsche's perspectivism itself tries to undermine: even if there is no 'ultimate' truth, it does not follow that every view is as good as every other" (Nehamas 197-98).

[31] "We have been looking for Nietzsche's positive views in the wrong place, or, more correctly, in the wrong dimension. Nietzsche does not describe his ideal character, but he still does produce a perfect instance of it. The immensely specific detail in which this character is presented answers the charge of vagueness, constitutes in itself an implicit commendation of that character, and at the same time constitutes an obstacle to its being a general model that should, or that even could, be followed by others… Nietzsche's texts therefore do not describe but, in exquisitely elaborate detail, exemplify the perfect instance of his ideal character. And this character is none other than the character these very texts constitute: Nietzsche himself" (Nehamas 230, 232-33).

know what they are we must first, as I have already begun to do here, interpret his texts. And

interpretation itself, according to Nietzsche, is a highly personal and creative affair" (Nehamas

38).[32] For Nehamas, interpreting is an individual endeavor and necessarily produces

heterogeneous interpretations.[33] And if these necessarily heterogeneous interpretations are

inevitable, perhaps even *good*, then one ought not worry about the problem of deciding which

descriptive account of Nietzsche's metaethics is best. The meta-interpretive problem of not

having justification to choose one interpretation over another is dissolved.

According to Nehamas, Nietzsche is able to dispense with questions about most justified

interpretations by revealing their heterogeneous character and the individual creativity required

to interpret.[34] In recognizing that "Nietzsche wanted to be, and was, the Plato of his own

Socrates," we are able to resolve interpretive dilemmas about the content of Nietzsche's views

and about which interpretation out of a selection to assent to (Nehamas 234).

I now turn to Adler, who proposes an equally radical reconceptualizing of Nietzsche's

project. In "Response to *Nietzsche's Constructivism*," Adler denotes two goals: He first critiques

Justin Remhof's defense of Nietzsche as a metaphysical constructivist.[35] Second, in a manner

similar to my own argument, Adler argues that the interpretive shortcomings he claims to find in

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[32] "Ultimately, the individual derives the values of its acts from itself; because it has to interpret in a quite individual way even the words it has inherited. Its interpretation of a formula at least is personal, even if it does not create a formula; as an interpreter, the individual is still creative" (WP 767).

[33] "The 'death of God,' both as hero and as author, allows Nietzsche to deny that the world is subject to a single overarching interpretation corresponding to God's role or intention. And its self-creation introduces the most paradoxical idea yet, the fact that the readers of this text are some of its own parts, some of its own characters, who in reading it further its self-creation" (Nehamas 91). Nehamas cites BGE 150 to support this interpretation: "Around the hero everything turns into tragedy; around the demigod everything turns into a satyr play; and around God everything turns into – what? Perhaps 'world'? —" (ibid.).

[34] See Nehamas 168, 194, 195, and 227 for further explanation as to how envisioning Nietzsche's project as a literary one resolves interpretive dilemmas.

[35] This *particular* interpretive disagreement between Adler and Remhof about whether or not Nietzsche holds a certain metaphysical view is not relevant to this paper, so I will not spend time presenting Remhof's positive argument, nor commenting on it. I simply note his involvement to better explain the context of Adler's claims. In other words, I do not argue that Adler's assessment of Remhof's interpretation is correct; I am merely interested in the larger methodological issue Adler presents.

Remhof's interpretation are symptoms of a larger methodological issue when studying Nietzsche in general (Adler 518).

To understand the methodological issue Adler claims to both encounter and resolve, we should examine his distinction between analytic and continental philosophy as it relates to the assumptions scholars in each tradition make about Nietzsche.[36] For Adler, analytic Nietzsche scholars affirm these commitments: Nietzsche's philosophy is a set of positions, Nietzsche's reasoning is linear and finite, and Nietzsche adopts a discursive presentation mode (Adler 517). Continental Nietzsche scholars, on the other hand, hold that: Nietzsche's philosophy is an event that indicates "a new horizon, a new perspective," Nietzsche's reasoning is nonlinear and infinite, and Nietzsche's presentation of his philosophy is rhetorical and literary (ibid.).[37] Adler points out that scholars approach and understand Nietzsche's philosophical methodology with either one or the other sets of assumptions; Adler's use of the terms *analytic* and *continental* are merely (perhaps disagreeable) shorthand for those sets of assumptions.

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[36] A multitude of issues arise when one uses the terms *analytic* and *continental*. There is disagreement regarding *what* they refer to – whether a historical, methodological, linguistic, or content-based divide – but also *whether* the terms refer to anything at all. For example, while some scholars see the divide as *to be bridged*, others see *no gap that requires bridging*. For example, Brian Leiter argues that, whether viewed as historical movements, methodological and stylistic groupings, or content groupings, there are no discernable unified categories of analytic and continental philosophy (Leiter 2006: 11-17).

It is difficult for me to avoid use of these terms entirely, however, since Adler defines his position in relation to them (Adler 524). Yet I also do not wish to prescribe how scholars ought to use the terms, or what the terms *really* mean. So while it may do a disservice to the historical development of the terms and the conception of the divide they represent to merely stipulate their meanings for the purposes of this paper, I use the terms in the way Adler does in order to best represent and respond to his view on his own terms. I explain these terms as Adler uses them below.

Note that Adler also, at times, refers to analytic and continental philosophy with quotation marks, and calls the labels "questionable" (Adler 518). So it appears that analytic and continental are little more than shorthand labels Adler uses to refer to assumptions one may make about Nietzsche's methodology. Also note that the analytic/continental distinction is not the same as the descriptive/appropriative distinction regarding goals in the history of philosophy. Appropriative and descriptive goals have both historically enjoyed popularity within the analytic tradition (if such a tradition exists) (Mercer 533).

[37] Note that, while continental assumptions about Nietzsche's methodology do deny that Nietzsche is a "philosopher of positions and arguments," the further assumption that Nietzsche is a philosopher of *contradictions* does not follow (Adler 519). The assumption that Nietzsche is a philosopher of contradictions is still a distorted kind of analytic assumption. Assuming that Nietzsche holds both P and ~P assumes, again, that Nietzsche is a philosopher of positions and arguments – merely contradictory ones!

To resolve the impasse reached when attempting to justify which descriptive interpretation of Nietzsche[38] is most accurate, Adler argues that one should favor the *continental* assumptions. That is, once we no longer conceive of Nietzsche "as a philosopher who has positions that we can 'get right'," we become able to understand "his philosophy… as an event" (Adler 524). Adler argues that conceiving of Nietzsche's philosophy as an event allows us to better understand Nietzsche's project – not as a studious investigation into and meticulous defense of the correct metaethical (or in this case, metaphysical) positions,[39] but instead as warning of the historical tendency towards nihilism, "nihilism as an event" (Adler 525). It is certainly the case that Nietzsche used this language of events to describe certain *types* of people. For example, essential to Nietzsche's understanding of the philosopher and the genius types is a description of the kind of events they take part in. Nietzsche insists that the philosopher plays a historical role; the philosopher's active shaping of the future can be described as an event.[40] And Nietzsche's depiction of the genius as "a being that either *begets* or *gives birth* (taking both words in their widest scope–)" further demonstrates the relationship he emphasizes between important figures and creative events (BGE 206).

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[38] While I focus on the impossibility of providing a best descriptive account of Nietzsche's *metaethics*, it is possible that a similar impasse results when attempting to identify Nietzsche's views on many and various contemporary issues we are concerned about. I leave open the possibility that the texts of various other historical figures are underdetermined, resulting in an epistemic inability to justify a best interpretation of their views as well.

[39] Such an approach would make a reader more like a *scholar* or philosophical laborer than a philosopher to Nietzsche. "The project for philosophical laborers on the noble model of Kant and Hegel is to establish some large class of given values (which is to say: values that were once *posited* and created but have come to dominate and have been called 'truths' for a long time) and press it into formulas, whether in the realm of *logic* or *politics* (morality) or *art*. It is up to these researchers to make everything that has happened or been valued so far look clear, obvious, comprehensible, and manageable, to abbreviate everything long, even 'time' itself, and to *overwhelm* the entire past. This is an enormous and wonderful task, in whose service any subtle pride or tough will can certainly find satisfaction. *But true philosophers are commanders and legislators*" (BGE 211).

[40] "True philosophers reach for the future with a creative hand and everything that is and was becomes a means, a tool, a hammer for them. Their "knowing" is *creating*, their creating is a legislating, their will to truth is – *will to power*" (BGE 211). Note that this passage does not imply, and is not being cited as implying that Nietzsche doesn't value truth.

Not only are Nietzsche's descriptions of the activities of philosophers and geniuses related to the events they participate in, but Adler argues that we should conceive of *Nietzsche's* philosophy as one of these events as well. Perhaps Nietzsche conceived of the purpose of his philosophy as an event which may re-orient the historical trajectory of society (or perhaps just higher men)[41] from further embracing nihilism.[42] If nihilism is an event, Adler argues that "the response to nihilism can only take the form of a mode of philosophical thinking that recognizes its own eventuality" (Adler 525). In other words, only one event can affect another. Because nihilism is a dangerous historical event, it must be combatted in the form of an event as well—Nietzsche's philosophy.

While both Nehamas and Adler present reconceptualizations of Nietzsche's project as either literary or an event, I believe they should be rejected. First, their solutions are too extreme for our problem. Just because we are unable to decide between interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics does not mean that we ought radically reevaluate Nietzsche's *entire* project. Again, the description of these accounts as radical is merely meant to indicate their scope; Nehamas and Adler propose that we see Nietzsche's entire corpus in a way entirely different from how contemporary Anhlophone philosophers view it, or in a way which rejects Adler's *analytic* assumptions. Below, I propose more modestly that we ought appropriate only when and where a best descriptive account of what a text has to say on a specific subject matter isn't forthcoming.

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[41] Nietzsche focuses on the negative effects that a morality of compassion and nihilism have on healthy or strong individuals specifically (GM III: 14). However, the ascetic ideal does injure *everyone* who affirms it, as it brings "new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt*" (GM III:28).

[42] Nietzsche regards nihilism as a dangerous historical event. "For the matter stands like so: the stunting and levelling of European man conceals *our* greatest danger, because the sight of this makes us tired… Right here is where the destiny of Europe lies – in losing our fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our respect for him, our hope in him and even our will to be man. The sight of man now makes us tired – what is nihilism today if it is not *that*?. . . *We are tired of man* ..." (GM I: 12). See also GM II: 24, where Nietzsche predicts that a "man of the future" will redeem humanity from nihilism. It is unclear if Nietzsche's philosophy itself is an anti-nihilism event or merely a prediction of a future anti-nihilism event.

Second, these prescriptions by Nehamas and Adler do not actually solve our initial problem –
they merely push it back a step. We are concerned with deciding which descriptive account of
Nietzsche's metaethics to endorse. I argue that we cannot decide. Nehamas would have us
reconceive of Nietzsche's entire project as literary in order to resolve this stalemate. Let us
assume that this reconceptualization of Nietzsche's project would resolve the dispute. Is the
matter settled? No, because Adler disagrees, and Nehamas's reconceptualization of Nietzsche's
project appears, at least potentially, mutually exclusive with Adler's! Did Nietzsche conceive of
his works as literature or as an event? It does not appear to be a trivial matter to decide between
these *descriptive* interpretations of Nietzsche's project.[43] However, there is a third option that
allows scholars to retain both metaethical Nietzschean claims and a more traditional (not
reconceptualized) framework, as opposed to thinking of Nietzsche's works as literary or an
event.[44] In fact, both Nehamas, Adler, and the analytic assumptions above contain a *further*

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[43] While it is true that Nehamas wrote a book defending his reconceptualization and Adler hasn't, the majority of
Nietzsche: Life as Literature is spent discussing first-order interpretive questions like *what is the will to power*, and
only ties all of these first-order questions together with Nehamas's second-order interpretation of *how we should
think about Nietzsche's entire project* at certain points. Also, the sheer *quantity* of quotes gathered in support of
one's view does not necessarily relate to the *quality* of support those quotes provide. One might even argue that, in
the same way Nietzsche's metaethical view is textually underdetermined, so too may what Nietzsche considered his
project to be doing be underdetermined – whether Nietzsche's corpus is a presentation of claims Nietzsche thought
true or good, or mere literature, or a historical event, or some other option. We may call this project-goal
underdetermination. While project-goal underdetermination is possible, to justifiably assert that it is true requires
more argument than is provided here. So while I do not assert whether, as a descriptive matter, Nietzsche understood
his works as a whole as one way or another, or that we can't determine how Nietzsche regarded his works, I do
argue that this question can be put aside for our purposes. To best overcome textual underdetermination regarding
metaethics, we are motivated to withhold assent to either one of the radical views or project-goal underdetermination
when my more modest proposal below resolves the issue.

[44] While I proceed to argue about one way to overcome this interpretive dilemma, *another* potential strategy would
be to reject that the continental or analytic assumptions must either be entirely affirmed or wholeheartedly denied;
one may plausibly adopt some continental and some analytic assumptions, or certain assumptions for certain texts or
portions of texts, or believe that Nietzsche's philosophy includes sets of positions *and* is literary and/or an event,
denying that the assumptions are mutually exclusive.

There is a *further* potential way to overcome the interpretive dilemma of underdetermined texts with
respect to metaethics, which is to abandon claims about what Nietzsche in fact believed about X while continuing to
make claims about what Nietzsche *could have* or *possibly* believed about X. Yet this solution may need some way to
justify why one possibility is favored over another, given that mutually exclusive possible beliefs may emerge. I
worry that such justification is similarly not forthcoming. I wonder whether scholars who talk about possibility
merely choose a possibility to endorse based on their present purposes and not due to anything about the historical
figure. Appropriation may be the better solution.

assumption which *itself* may be denied: that the purpose of doing the history of philosophy is to

describe the views of historical figures as accurately as possible.[45]

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[45] Nehamas *just* falls short of denying this assumption. He grants that his interpretation of Nietzsche is *consistent* with Nietzsche while deliberately avoiding the question of whether his interpretation is *accurate* (Nehamas 3). However, Nehamas later explains "that some interpretations are better than others and that we can even know sometimes that this is the case" (ibid.). Presumably, Nehamas believes that his interpretation of Nietzsche's works as literary is one of the better ones.

6   APPROPRIATION

To appreciate this option requires some historical knowledge about the development of the history of philosophy. Fifty years ago, the primary goal of philosophers doing work in the history of philosophy was *appropriative* (Mercer 534). To restate, the goal of appropriative work is to use the work of historical figures to develop a maximally-coherent philosophical view for the purposes of contemporary philosophy, regardless of whatever the original scholar had intended. Notable figures in the history of philosophy are studied, and their views interpreted, in order for contemporary scholars to "develop… their own theories, arguments, analyses, etc." (Morgan 725).[46] In this way, studying the history of philosophy is instrumentally valuable in informing contemporary philosophical discussion.[47]

However, appropriationism has become unpopular in recent decades. Today, many scholars favor a *descriptive* goal of the history of philosophy, also known as contextualism or historical reconstructionism (Mercer 533, 536). Christia Mercer explains that one unifying feature among scholars for whom this goal is primary is that they care about "getting things right" (Mercer 530). This is to say that, when scholars talk about certain views *as* the views of a historical figure, that figure should (counterfactually) be able to recognize those views "as their own" (ibid.). Quentin Skinner echoes this concern when he states that "no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done" (Skinner 28). As stated in the introduction, however, making claims about the beliefs of historical figures, counterfactual or factual, is merely *one*

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[46] As an example of appropriation, Michael Morgan mentions "identifying a plausible account of human psychology that can be developed into a moral and a political theory. Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a convenient vehicle for presenting, articulating, and defending such a theory" (Morgan 724).

[47] Note again that appropriationism *doesn't* entail that one's inspiration taken from historical works is valuable merely because a famous figure wrote those works. Neither descriptive nor appropriating goal-pursuing scholars should endorse arguments from authority or popularity.

possible descriptive goal. Overall, scholars who pursue a descriptive goal within the history of

philosophy attempt to accurately describe and make true claims about the views of historical

figures, their works, or characters in or components of their works.[48]

With the increasing assent to descriptive goals came many arguments against

appropriative goals. For example, Robert Sleigh argues against looking to past figures in order to

answer contemporary philosophical questions. "If you want to work on the problem of personal

identity," Sleigh claims, "it is useful to read John Locke's writings, but it is more important to

read Sidney Shoemaker—in part, of course, because Shoemaker has incorporated Locke's

insights in his own work. If you are interested in making a contribution to the metaphysics of

modality, it does no harm to study Leibniz, but Kripke is really more to the point" (Sleigh 2-3).

If scholars are interested in contemporary philosophical issues, Sleigh argues that they ought to

study contemporary philosophers, not historical figures. And speaking specifically about

appropriation in Nietzsche scholarship, and whether appropriation is occurring today, Tom Stern

writes, "why not just remove these philosophical views from the Nietzsche-zone and present

them as your own views, in your own voice with your own arguments (perhaps giving Nietzsche

an honorable mention)? It might feel safer or be more expedient to hide them behind a famous

name, but I think neither of these motivations is very good (or very flattering) and I find it hard

to believe that they account for what is going on" (Stern 19). Because Stern believes one's

potential motivations for appropriating Nietzsche, safety in hiding behind a famous name for

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[48] One may wonder whether scholars can achieve all of these goals. One may produce scholarship that accurately describes the views of a historical figure through careful historical, contextual analysis, and *also* utilize the resulting views in contemporary debate (Mercer 544). In general, holding these goals in tandem seems possible. However, as I argue that it is *not possible* to produce a most accurate description of Nietzsche's metaethical view, this possibility is not available in this case. In other words, scholars cannot read what Nietzsche has to say about metaethics carefully in order to most accurately describe his metaethical view because *the texts are underdetermined* in respect to which metaethical view he held. One is no more justified in claiming that the most accurate account of Nietzsche's view is a kind of constitutivism than claiming that the most accurate account is fictionalism.

instance, are unappealing, he argues that scholars today have good reasons for not appropriating Nietzsche, and are most likely not appropriating Nietzsche (ibid.).[49]

While I agree that Nietzsche scholars today typically do not believe that they are appropriating,[50] given that appropriationism in the history of philosophy as a whole has become unpopular in the past few decades, I disagree that such scholars *ought not* appropriate (Stern 18). Also, note that Stern's characterization of appropriation, hiding behind or surreptitiously building on a famous figure or work, describes more accurately what I call descriptive misrepresentation, *not* appropriation. Honest and pure appropriation ought to explicitly state that no claims are being made as to what the author or text under discussion *really* believed or states regarding a certain topic. On the contrary, regarding Nietzsche's metaethics, I believe appropriation is the time-lost solution to the underdetermination problem in Section III. Given that a purely-descriptive best account of Nietzsche's metaethical view is not forthcoming, adopting an appropriative goal allows us to keep gaining metaethical insight from Nietzsche while also retaining the analytic assumptions above, such as that Nietzsche's claims are truth-apt. As an example of metaethical insight, Katsanfanas's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaethics

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[49] Note that Stern's argument is primarily concerned with a misuse of the principle of charity in Nietzsche scholarship, and he would not object to "appropriationist reading *per se*," as long as the author is clear about their goals (Stern 2). However, he later argues against potential motivations for appropriating Nietzsche such that, in practice, Stern doesn't believe scholars to have legitimate reasons for appropriating.

[50] One may object that a scholar's *belief* about what they are doing may differ from what they actually do. If Hussain and Katsafanas are *in fact* appropriating (despite their claims to description), that reality may explain why contemporary Nietzsche scholarship seems different in kind from Skinner's descriptive work, if one takes there to be a difference. However, there may not be a difference between belief and reality here; to explicitly adopt a descriptive goal *is* to engage in a descriptive project. When scholars make claims about what Nietzsche or his text really means, they operate in a descriptive mode. Even if a scholar was in fact inspired by Nietzsche to explicate and defend a certain view, that scholar's *ascription* of the view to Nietzsche *is* description. Therefore, if Skinner, Hussain, and Katsafanas are all operating under descriptive goals, any differences one sees between them must be explained by appeal to something else. Perhaps Skinner places more importance on the value of linguistic analysis in the history of philosophy (although I do not defend this explanation). In summary, these scholars claim to adopt a descriptive and appropriative goal (to determine Nietzsche's metaethical view and then demonstrate its contemporary value and uniqueness). However, their assent to a descriptive interpretation is unjustified given textual underdetermination. The philosophical value of their interpretations may be salvageable in clarifying their status as appropriative.

results in a novel form of constitutivism. If Katsafanas were to specify an appropriative goal, this new Nietzschean Constitutivism will be assessable wholly on its own terms, removed from questions above descriptive accuracy.

For clarity's and honesty's sakes, I suggest one change to the way scholars discuss "Nietzsche's opinion" on contemporary philosophical issues once the appropriative goal is adopted. Instead of claiming to have *found* or most accurately interpreted Nietzsche's view on any one contemporary topic, declare openly that the Nietzsche under discussion is really *your* Nietzsche. This language is already widely used when discussing "Plato's Socrates," for example (Nehamas 29). While Plato does present an elaborate a picture of Socrates, the texts and historical findings underdetermine (at least to a degree) what the actual Socrates *truly* believed.[51] On certain contemporary philosophical issues, the same is true of Nietzsche. So as an appropriationist in the history of philosophy, I may claim that "my" Nietzsche is a moral fictionalist, or a constitutivist.[52] This phraseology is useful insofar as I may then apply "my" Nietzsche's metaethical view usefully to contemporary metaethical questions without defending the descriptive claim that such metaethical view is the most correct description of Nietzsche's thought. I can then focus on contemporary issues about whether fictionalism or constitutivism is true instead of being hindered by the nearly impossible task of determining what Nietzsche *really* believed.

One may worry that, with the construction of a best descriptive account of Nietzche's metaethics abandoned in favor of appropriation, resulting in novel views for contemporary

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[51] This language does not perfectly capture my suggestion, given that one may still ask descriptive claims about what the character Socrates believes. But note that contemporary scholars do not often ask what the historical Socrates believed – the texts are plausibly epistemically underdetermined regarding *that*.

[52] Note that I am not saying "my *reading of* Nietzsche." Such phraseology would imply a belief about interpretive accuracy. If I were to say, "On my reading of Nietzsche, Nietzsche is a fictionalist," I also hold the belief that my reading is the most accurate – otherwise, I would have a different reading.

discussion, there is no more place for the historical Nietzsche in metaethical discussion. I believe this worry to be an instance of the larger question: what is the value of historical figures in the history of philosophy if what is really important is getting at the truth of philosophical matters, acquiring justified true beliefs and letting go of false ones? Is Nietzschean Constitutivism only valuable if it is true, specifically true about the *world*, given that we cannot answer whether it is a true description of *Nietzsche's* view? I think not. I have nowhere argued that appropriation is the only valuable philosophical enterprise. To think so would at least commit oneself to ahistoricizing a fundamentally historical discipline. While the veracity of metaethical positions is undoubtebly important, to care single-mindedly about claim veracity is to ignore *where* ideas come from, *how* they arise, *when* and *why* and *from whom*. Perhaps historical figures are important because of the plausible claims they've made, or beceause of how they've shaped the philosophical landscape, or for any number of other reasons. I only argue that appropriation can produce important ideas; I do not further claim that the historical Nietzsche is *unimportant*. As an example of this importance, Nietzsche remains a source of great inspiration for readers. Obviously, appropriations of Nietzsche's metaethics would never have been created if not for Nietzsche. There must be descriptive reasons why many believe Nietzsche far more inspiring to read than a daily newspaper (even though those reasons cannot reference Nietzsche's actual metaethical view).

One may also worry that endorsing appropriation makes all attempted appropriations of Nietzsche's metaethics equally justified, but this is not so. Not even Nehamas, who believes that two mutually exclusive interpretations can be just as good as one another, believes the further claim that *all* interpretations are just as good as one another (Nehamas 197-98). Nehemas seems to distinguish between interpretations on the basis of non-factual evaluative preferences like how

interesting, creative, or beautiful a work is. Nehamas implies these criteria when dismissing "Tennyson's version of Odysseus [as] *a trifle* compared to Homer's" (ibid., emphasis mine). Yet appropriations have further constraints when determining their value. Even when Nietzsche's metaethics is underdetermined in a passage, not *everything* in a passage is underdetermined. One ought get as much right as one can. Finally, while I argue that one cannot justifiably *assent* to a positive conception of Nietzsche's metaethics, we are warranted in *dismissing* certain interpretations of Nietzsche's metaethics. Claiming that Nietzsche was a supernaturalist (where God determines moral value) is obviously inconsistent with the entirety of Nietzsche's corpus. So even Nietzsche's metaethics, underdetermined as it is, is not able to spawn a limitless number of appropriations.

7   CONCLUSION

There are many reasons why the appropriative approach fell out of favor historically among history of philosophy scholars. Over time, it became explicitly rejected by more and more influential scholars (Mercer 537-39). Also, I believe that the appropriative goal was *too* dominant. Around 1980, "the *only* correct way to engage in historical work was to do so *for the sake of* contemporary philosophy" (Mercer 534). I think this view is too strong. I endorse a purely appropriative goal only when the justification for choosing between descriptive interpretations is not forthcoming. I argue that Nietzsche's metaethics is an area where this is the case. However, appropriationists have historically endorsed appropriation exclusively, even when a scholar's view *could* justifiably be given a most accurate descriptive account. Appropriative scholars simply weren't interested in such accounts as philosophy.

However, we shouldn't be afraid to once again pursue an appropriative goal in the history of philosophy despite its present unpopularity. In order to move beyond the problems generated by the descriptive to Nietzsche's metaethics, appropriation should be selected as the superior option when compared to the alternatives mentioned here: either being unable to justify assent to Katsafanas's interpretation over Hussain's (or vice versa) or being required to entirely shift our conception of Nietzsche's project as a whole. Appropriation is also a goal that "my" Nietzsche supports, despite the word's negative connotation (and present disrepute). Nietzsche writes,

> Life itself is essentially a process of appropriating, injuring, overpowering the alien and
> the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least,
> the very least, exploiting, – but what is the point of always using words that have been
> stamped with slanderous intentions from time immemorial? … [A living body] will have
> to be the embodiment of will to power, it will want to grow, spread, grab, win

dominance, – not out of any morality or immorality, but because it is alive, and because

life is precisely will to power. (BGE 259)

While Nietzsche believed appropriation necessary for life, I argue that it is at least appropriate

when applied to Nietzsche's own metaethical view – a case where many descriptive accounts

exist, and there is no clear justification for choosing one over another. Appropriation may also be

appropriate in similar contexts, where there is no justification for choosing one descriptive

interpretation of certain historical texts regarding a concept over another.

However, one may worry about the morality of appropriating a text. As Nietzsche notes

above, appropriation sounds slanderous or nefarious. Is appropriation justifiable? Is it morally

permissible? First, recognize that those who answer *no* to these questions are often discussing

descriptive *misrepresentation*, not appropriation. Second, while modern connotations of the word

are often negative, as in terms like cultural appropriation, note appropriation's etymology.

Appropriation comes from *appropriare*, meaning *to make one's own*. When considered merely

as an uptaking into oneself or a making of one's own in this way, appropriation loses some of its

negative valence. Third, "my" Nietzsche explains above that appropriation is justified because it

is a necessary activity of life. I personally at least endorse the milder claim that, for scholars

interested in Nietzsche's metaethics, appropriation is necessary to continue talking about

Nietzsche's metaethics without either making unjustifiable descriptive claims or reassessing

Nietzsche's entire project. Appropriation is an achievable goal in cases where the creation of a

best descriptive account is sometimes not.

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