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Nietzsche's Meta-axiology: Against the Skeptical Readings

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I. Introduction

In the Preface to his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche sets as his task to enquire into the 'value' [*Werth*] of our 'values' [*Werthe*] (6). By framing the question in this way, Nietzsche would appear to be using the term 'value' in two different ways.¹ He uses it in an anthropological sense to pick out the ideals and codes of conduct that people have thus far *taken* to be valuable. When he writes, particularly in the plural, of 'values' and traces their genealogy, he would appear, in the same spirit, to be using the term as if in inverted commas, with no commitment on his part to the axiological standing of the 'values' under consideration. Let us call these *values in the descriptive sense*. Yet when Nietzsche considers what *value* these values themselves have, he would seem to be using the term 'value' in a more loaded way, where it is reflective (at the very least) of what *he* takes to be valuable. Does Nietzsche, I want to ask, regard his own value judgments on this front as having any claim to accuracy? I take it that Nietzsche thinks that it is uncontroversial that certain things are instrumentally valuable for a given agent, relative to his or her contingent ends. The question in the offing in this paper is whether there is also some more ambitious notion of value in his work apart from this. Let us call this *genuine value*, and let us call the bearers of this property *genuine values*. Values in the descriptive sense have genuine value (or, alternatively, are genuine values in addition to being simply descriptive values) insofar as they are accurate to an evaluative fact-of-the matter.²

One must stress at the outset that this is a particularly thorny exegetical issue. The textual evidence is scant. Nietzsche never sets out his views systematically. And often, when he is speaking of the status of 'values', it is unclear whether he has in mind simply the descriptive sense or the

¹ Clark and Dudrick, "Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity", are sensitive to a similar distinction. See also Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 348.

² Such accuracy needn't be an all-or-nothing affair. It might be that being a genuine value is a matter of degree.

evaluatively-laden sense. Even assuming that Nietzsche is seeking to pronounce on matters meta-axiological (and not merely anthropological and sociological) in the passages when he discusses the nature and status of ‘values’, what he says in a given snippet of text is often compatible with a number of different views, some of which are indeed thoroughly skeptical, but some of which would allow for certain descriptive values to be accurate to evaluative facts (if not necessarily to a *mind-independent* evaluative facts) and thereby to have genuine value in the sense at issue.

In what follows, I am *not* going to be attributing to Nietzsche some sophisticated meta-axiological view. For my part, I am doubtful that he has one.³ Standing back from this burgeoning exegetical debate, it might give one serious pause that in the philosophically-sophisticated cottage industry on Nietzsche’s meta-ethics and meta-axiology, he has been attributed nearly the full gamut of possible views, everything from realism (objective and subjective) to nihilism to expressivism to fictionalism to constitutivism to constructivism.⁴ Nietzsche’s texts are no strangers to great interpretive controversy. But I fear that these widely divergent readings may be the result of the fact that his texts seriously underdetermine where he stands on these important issues. I will not, however, try to substantiate that concern here. My goal in this paper is modest, but important: It is not to show that Nietzsche embraced some particular option on the menu of various –isms. It is, however, to show that Nietzsche’s texts do not *require* the skeptical meta-axiological interpretations that have been prominent in the recent literature.⁵ And it is thereby to suggest that we needn’t give up on the idea that Nietzsche takes the values he champions to be genuine values—and not because he has some sophisticated realist meta-axiological theory of their status, but in a more philosophically unreflective way.

³ See, on this issue, the cautious remarks of Hussain, “Nietzsche’s Meta-ethical Stance”, 412.

⁴ For example: Objective realism—Schacht, *Nietzsche*; Subjective realism—Langsam, “How to Combat Nihilism” and Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*; Nihilism—Leiter, “Against the Privilege Readings”; Expressivism—Clark and Dudrick, “Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity”; Fictionalism—Hussain, “Honest Illusion”; Constitutivism—Katsafanas, “Deriving Ethics from Action”; Constructivism—Silk, “Nietzschean Constructivism”.

⁵ Among the strongest arguments given in the recent literature for seeing Nietzsche as a meta-axiological skeptic—that is, as someone claiming that no descriptive values have genuine evaluative standing—are those of Leiter, “Against the Privilege Readings,” Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”, and of Hussain, “Honest Illusion”.

One of Nietzsche's guiding philosophical projects, after all, is to offer a critique of a family of (in his view) highly problematic ideologies associated with Judeo-Christian morality and its secular descendants—ideologies that he sees as imperiling human excellence and cultural flourishing. We should not, as I see it, pull the meta-axiological rug out from under his criticism without good interpretive arguments in favor of doing so. For in attributing to him blanket meta-axiological skepticism, we thereby would turn Nietzsche's guiding project into one that he thinks has no authority or legitimacy for anyone else, unless they happen to share his personal evaluative preferences. We accordingly should weigh the textual evidence in favor of meta-axiological skepticism carefully before concluding that it is a position that Nietzsche himself endorses.

I want to begin by discussing some preliminary issues that will need to inform our discussion going forward. This stage-setting will be the task of section II. Then we will continue with the exegesis in the sections to follow. The basic question to be asked about Nietzsche's meta-axiology essentially takes this form: Could Nietzschean ethics really be getting something right, that, say, a form of utilitarianism devoted to the 'green-pasture happiness of the herd' (BGE, 44) is getting wrong?⁶

II. Meta-Axiology, Not (Simply) Meta-Ethics

Much of the existing secondary literature in this general area focuses on the question of Nietzsche's *meta-ethics*. Although we may notice affinities Nietzsche has with certain contemporary meta-ethical categories—such as naturalist or non-naturalist, cognitivist or non-cognitivist, internalist or externalist about reasons—we must tread very carefully before slotting him into any of

⁶ Leiter frames the central questions as follows: "Is there any fact of the matter about ethical issues? This loosely framed metaphysical question evokes a family of related questions as well: Are there absolute moral truths or are moral judgments always relative? Does the world contain objective moral properties or are moral properties simply human projections on a morally neutral universe?" "Against the Privilege Readings", 278. Notice the metaphysical as opposed to linguistic orientation in evidence here. By way of contrast, several strands in contemporary meta-ethics would draw the party lines of meta-ethics around questions about whether moral discourse is truth apt, questions about whether it is describing reality or doing something else, such as expressing our attitudes or our commitment to a system of norms, and so on. The question here is: 'are there genuine values?', not 'what is moral language doing?' I will be addressing the former metaphysical question in this paper, not the latter semantic one.

these categories. As the title of the paper and the introduction makes clear, I prefer to couch this as an investigation into Nietzsche's 'meta-axiology'. By framing the issue as a 'meta-axiological' one, I am trying to remain true to the spirit of Nietzsche's own way of conceptualizing things. The primary normative entities that he concerns himself with are 'values' [*Werthe*], and thus 'meta-axiology' captures this focus well. There are three main considerations that further speak in favor of this approach.

The first consideration has to do more with the connotation of 'meta-ethics' than with the actual extension of what it can investigate. Although in theory meta-ethics casts a broad net, so as to encompass investigation into the standing of a range of non-moral values as well, in practice it can sometimes end up as something that might be better described as meta-morality. There is a danger of thinking that the question on the table here is one about Nietzsche's views about the standing of *morality* (in his sense) exclusively. But the question, we must remember, is as much about the standing of Nietzsche's own values as it is about the standing of the values of morality. These two sorts of values needn't be fellow travelers: Nietzsche can be dubious about status of moral values (*qua* moral values at least) without being dubious about the standing of values *tout court*.

Second, questions of both ethics and meta-ethics frequently take on a *practical* cast. The first-order question often is thought to be 'What ought I to do?' or 'What do I have reason, or most reason, to do?' And the meta-ethical question then is, 'In virtue of what does this "ought" have authority?' Or: 'What makes it the case that I have reason, or most reason, to do x?' 'Are these reasons rooted in what my ideally rational self would desire for me to desire?' 'Must they be anchored in my subjective motivational set?' And so on. What I am calling the *practical* approach is of course a very natural way of thinking about ethics, and thus about meta-ethics. Some may even regard it as the *sine qua non* of this branch of philosophy. I don't mean to suggest that meta-ethics would necessarily *need* to concern itself with the standing of various practical claims exclusively. But given the tendency of some of its practitioners to focus their work in this way, I want to be abundantly clear that this is not my approach here.

This is because an exclusive focus on the practical is an overly restrictive and distorting approach for dealing with Nietzsche's value theory.⁷ Nietzsche, to be sure, is interested in the practical perspective, and in particular, he is interested in giving an historical account of the genesis of a sophisticated modern form of this perspective, as Christine Korsgaard has pointed out.⁸ Nietzsche is also of course interested in ethical questions framed from the practical perspective—if not from a Kantian agential perspective.⁹ But it would be a mistake to refract Nietzsche's *entire discussion of values*, and thus his discussion about the standing of values, through the lens of the practical question of what actions a given agent must, or ought, or has reason to perform. Nietzsche is not primarily concerned with generating an account whose goal is to prescribe or to assess actions that must be performed. Rather, he is concerned with making critical evaluations about individuals and cultures.¹⁰ From these evaluative claims, Nietzsche does not thereby always try to *derive* practical claims about what people ought or have most reason to do, so as then to assess, perhaps to indict people, especially for irrationality, if they fail to live in accordance with or to promote what they recognize to be valuable.¹¹

⁷ Geuss, "Outside Ethics".

⁸ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 158-60.

⁹ See, for example, Nietzsche's vehement rejection of Kant's ideas about the importance of acting from the motive of duty in A, 11, or his discussion of the duty (presumably in some non-Kantian sense) of higher human beings to treat lower human beings tenderly in A, 57.

¹⁰ Thomson, *Normativity*, distinguishes between what she calls 'directives' (e.g., John ought to be kind his brother) and 'evaluatives' (e.g., John is a good person) as two basic kinds of normative judgments, p. 2. In these terms, we should describe Nietzsche as concerned as much (and perhaps more) with evaluatives as with directives. Railton, "Nietzsche's Normative Theory?" makes a similar point.

¹¹ Much of the normative thinking that Nietzsche criticizes is strongly prescriptive in orientation, and its prescriptions are supposed to be anchored in the dictates of reason, and more specifically, these are supposed to be undergirded by the possibility of a rational argument justifying the correctness of these prescriptions. Socrates, Plato, and Kant are some of the most prominent representatives of this venerable tradition of trying "[w]ith a stiff seriousness that inspires laughter...to supply a *rational foundation*" for morality (BGE, 186). Though Nietzsche is far from being an "irrationalist"—the charge peddled by Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, Ch. III, Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*, Ch. IV and others—Nietzsche is not a "rationalist" either in that he does not seek to anchor values in the dictates of reason, nor does he affect to provide a rationally-compelling argument for the superiority of his own values.

Because of this focus on the evaluative more than on the directive, the axiological and meta-axiological structure of Nietzsche's value theory is arguably in the mold more of aesthetics than of ethics, at least as ethics is often conceived of today. We praise artists for realizing aesthetic values in their works. We look down on others for creating works that are, say, tawdry or shallow. But the normative question, in the first instance, is primarily one of evaluation, not of action-guiding directive, especially one backed up by the commands of reason. Consider the typical relation between first and second-order evaluations in aesthetics. At the first-order level, the question is an evaluative one: Is this painting any good? At the meta-level, the question is about the standing of that evaluation itself. Is it objective? Subjectively universal, as Kant would have it? A matter of the idiosyncratic preference of a given person or clique? There are no doubt questions to be asked about what is to be done in light of these aesthetic values. Are we to contemplate the painting frequently? Preserve it from destruction at all costs? Effect a radical life transformation, as the speaker in Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' feels called to do in the presence of the fragmentary statue? But these are downstream, as it were, from questions about the work's value, downstream regardless of what one thinks is responsible for underwriting these claims of what one should do ('internal' or 'external' reasons in one form of the contemporary lingo). This is because the question about the work's value is not, in the first instance, a practical question about actions or potential actions.¹² In the case of aesthetics, it seems bizarre and strained always to try to turn it into one. Nietzsche often takes up this aesthetics-influenced approach to evaluative questions, even when it comes to questions that have to do not just with art narrowly, but with life more generally.

This may, however, tempt us into thinking that what we need is meta-aesthetics, rather than meta-ethics, when it comes to the standing of Nietzsche's values. But this too would be a mistake. When we consider the sorts of values Nietzsche celebrates, such as the '*Pracht*' [magnificence] of the greatest human beings (GM, 'Preface', 6), it would seem that they are in a sort of overlapping

¹² Even if one thinks that in making a judgment of aesthetic merit, one is thereby necessarily disposed to do certain things or have certain desiderative attitudes toward the work of art, the judgment is not *itself* one about potential actions one ought to perform.

space between aesthetics and ethics. *Pracht* is certainly not a moral value, in Nietzsche's sense of 'moral'. Is this an aesthetic value instead? Or an ethical value, by the lights of a Nietzschean perfectionistic ethics? There is perhaps a case to be made for both, so long as the categories of the ethical and the aesthetic are construed broadly enough. But there is little point, I think, in trying to shoehorn this kind of value into either category, given the associations both terms can often conjure up—the aesthetic as having to do with art or beauty specifically, the ethical as having to do primarily with morality and with the practical stance. It is better just to say that Nietzsche celebrates certain values. At the second-order level, the question is then best thought of as one not of meta-ethics narrowly, but of meta-axiology more broadly, the question being: what evaluative standing does Nietzsche take his own preferred values to have, compared to other conceptions of the good? Does Nietzsche see himself as getting something right that others are getting wrong?

III. Skepticism About the Standing of Values

According to an influential reading, Nietzsche does not accord genuine evaluative standing to *any* values, including his own favored values.¹³ That perfectionistic values triumph is for Nietzsche nothing more than his own preference. The vehemence with which Nietzsche trumpets his own values and denounces those of others is highly misleading, proponents think. Nietzsche resorts to this impassioned rhetoric because he wants to use all the means at his disposal to persuade others (potential Nietzschean 'higher types' or 'free spirits' anyway) to abandon their current preferences and to adopt his. But, on this reading, he does not think that his values could really be better in the sense of being more accurate to a matter of evaluative fact. In this section and the one to follow I will consider the most prominent interpretive arguments for this skeptical position and question whether they are adequately supported by Nietzsche's texts.

Nietzsche has recently been thought to advocate an 'argument from disagreement', a precursor of the sort that are sometimes given in contemporary meta-ethics. On this interpretation,

¹³ Leiter, "Against the Privilege Readings" and Hussain "Honest Illusion".

Nietzsche argues from the fact of seemingly intractable disagreement about normative claims and draws the abductive inference that there is no fact of the matter underlying these competing claims.¹⁴ Regardless of the philosophical merits or demerits of this sort of argument, let us begin by considering what textual evidence we have for thinking that Nietzsche accepts an argument of this form.¹⁵

The strongest exegetical evidence proponents marshal for this interpretation is a passage from the *Nachlaß* :

It is a very remarkable moment: the Sophists verge upon the first *critique of morality*, the first *insight* into morality [*Moral*]:– they juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of moral value judgments; –they let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified; i.e, they divine that all attempts to give reasons for morality are necessarily sophistical– a proposition later proved on the grand scale by the ancient philosophers, from Plato onwards (down to Kant);– they postulate the first truth that a ‘morality-in-itself’, a ‘good-in-itself’ do not exist, that it is a swindle to talk of ‘truth’ in this field (WP, 428).¹⁶

From this notebook entry, it is not clear that Nietzsche is making the strong abductive inference that the argument from disagreement would require. When Nietzsche appeals to the sophists, citing their conclusion that it is ‘a swindle to talk of “truth”’ in this field, the relevant field would seem to be that of morality in particular, not obviously the field of values in general.¹⁷ But

¹⁴ Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”. Leiter’s emphasis is not on folk disagreement, but on disagreement at the level of rival philosophical theories.

¹⁵ For sensible skepticism about a related sort of argument, see Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 60.

¹⁶ Cited in Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”.

¹⁷ The only reason one could think he is making a more ambitious claim about values in general is his remark *en passant* that there is no “good-in-itself”. But this is likely meant as a swipe against Plato. There is, by Nietzsche’s lights, no Form of the Good as Plato envisaged it. But simply because Nietzsche rejects what is in his view a supernatural and faulty *conception* of a standard of correctness for values, it doesn’t follow that he is doubtful of any standards of correctness whatsoever, particularly when it comes to his own values.

putting this consideration aside, the passage, as something that Nietzsche never published, is itself of questionable pedigree to begin with.¹⁸ Much of this notebook material is sketchy and ill-considered and for good reason never makes it into the polished works Nietzsche chose to publish.¹⁹ And when we look to his published works, there is strong evidence that Nietzsche *definitively rejects* a (similar, though not identical) argument from disagreement. In Book V of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche derides as ‘childish’ the argument made by those who ‘see the truth that among different nations moral valuations are *necessarily* different and then infer from this that *no* morality is at all binding’ [*einen Schluss auf Unverbindlichkeit aller Moral machen*]. (GS, 345). If Nietzsche will not even accept a form of this argument for undermining morality in particular, he surely will not accept it for undermining all values, including non-moral values. The textual case is not very strong for attributing to Nietzsche an argument from disagreement, at least one with ambitions of establishing a general form of axiological skepticism.²⁰

A second argument notes Nietzsche’s frequent assimilation of value judgments to matters of taste.²¹ Nietzsche, for example, characteristically writes: ‘What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons’ (GS, 132). From the fact that Nietzsche appeals to taste in his criticism of the values of others, it might be inferred that he thinks there are no standards of correctness in this realm.²² But at the very least, it is far from obvious that someone as elitist and snobbish as Nietzsche would think that there are no standards of correctness in matters of taste, so

¹⁸ Leiter, “Against the Privilege Readings”, 287.

¹⁹ Leiter, “Against the Privilege Readings”, 287.

²⁰ Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”. Leiter does not account for GS 345, though, in fairness to him, he might point out that it is focused on disagreement specifically among “nations,” not in rival philosophical theories, and that Nietzsche might be dubious about arguments from disagreement in the case of the former without being dubious about them in the case of the latter. Nonetheless, the key point for my reading is that even if Nietzsche does accept an argument from disagreement, it doesn’t, based on the evidence offered, speak to values in general. In the three other passages Leiter cites from the published corpus (BGE 5, 186, and 187), there is no evidence that Nietzsche is taking a skeptical stand, on the basis of an argument from disagreement, toward the standing of values in general. Nietzsche’s claims in these passages are all more modest.

²¹ Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”.

²² Leiter, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”.

that the tastes of the ‘*Pöbel*’ (the rabble—one of his favorite terms of abuse) are not really worse than his are. Nietzsche’s remarks about taste do not lend any comfort to meta-axiological skepticism, unless one just begs the question from the start with the far-from-obviously-Nietzschean assumption that there is no genuine privilege that one person’s taste can have over another’s.

A third skeptical argument often attributed to Nietzsche is a form of inference to the best explanation. Such an argument would have Nietzsche doing something quite ambitious. It would see him as holding that appeals to genuine values (that is, values with standing) are idle, since we can explain human evaluative commitments by reference to non-evaluative facts.²³ The best explanation for why people cling to the value claims that they do is not that they are cottoning on to the truth regarding the questions at issue, but that they have certain social, psychological, and physical needs that drive them to make these particular claims about what is of value, regardless of how the world stands axiologically.

Nietzsche does think, as a matter of historical genealogy, that he can explain why many people come to endorse the evaluative worldviews that they do by appealing to features of their social, psychological, and physical condition. It is far more controversial, however, whether Nietzsche takes his explanations to lead to the sort of radical eliminativism about genuine values that would be needed to underwrite skepticism about the standing of any values. Even proponents of this view note that Nietzsche does not explicitly draw this conclusion himself.²⁴ Moreover, if Nietzsche did opt for a sort of eliminativism about a range of different values in particular (namely, those of morality), he wouldn’t need to be eliminativist about all values, including his own perfectionist values. Indeed, even stipulating that Nietzsche thinks one can explain all evaluative commitments by reference to wholly non-evaluative facts about the people with those commitments and their environment, it is contentious, on purely philosophical grounds, that the strong eliminativist conclusion should follow. This recognition may be grounds for something weaker,

²³ Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 148.

²⁴ As Leiter himself notes, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 148.

perhaps epistemic humility about one's first-order value judgments, or agnosticism about the standing of values, instead of outright skepticism about the standing of any values. After all, it may be overdetermined why people accept the values that they do, or it may be that non-evaluative considerations simply have more explanatory heft than evaluative ones, even though there are nonetheless genuine evaluative facts.

And it bears pointing out how questionable, as a reading of Nietzsche, the claim is that he explains all apparent evaluative facts in non-evaluative terms. Nietzsche's 'explanations', such as they are, are far from being couched in wholly non-evaluative, coolly scientific terms. In the First Essay of the *Genealogy*, for example, his explanations would seem, on the contrary, to make use at times of thick concepts such as nobility and baseness, concepts in which an evaluative dimension arguably is already built in. The nobility of certain people, he appears to think, explains why they have the value commitments that they do, and the baseness of others explains why they have the value commitments that they do (GM, I:10-11). So too, one might suspect, with strength and weakness, as Nietzsche is understanding them; they would themselves seem to be evaluatively-laden concepts. Nietzsche could think that these apparently thick categories are wholly reducible to non-evaluative characteristics, but that is by no means obvious.

Explanatory arguments with skeptical conclusions have played an important role in meta-ethics during the past half century, and one may wish to make Nietzsche out to be a forerunner of this tradition. Yet, as with attributing Nietzsche the last two positions we considered as well, the textual evidence for doing so is at best indecisive.

IV. Skepticism About the Metaphysical Objectivity of Value?

_____ So far, we have considered skeptical arguments Nietzsche might have accepted. Proponents of the skeptical interpretation think they find even more decisive evidence that regardless of whether he had a convincing argument for the view, Nietzsche issues a blanket denial that there

could be genuine values.²⁵ Two famous passages, in the *The Gay Science* (301) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (I, “On the Thousand and One Goals”) respectively, are often appealed to and can seem to suggest such a view. But as I will argue in this section, the textual evidence is far more ambiguous and less decisive than proponents of this interpretation have recognized.

In *The Gay Science* he writes, ‘Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself [*an sich*], according to its nature [*seiner Natur nach*]—nature [*Natur*] is always valueless [*werthlos*], but has been given value at some time, as a present—and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it’ [*wir waren diese Gebenden und Schenkenden*] (GS, 301)].²⁶ Such textual evidence might seem to suggest that Nietzsche is doubtful that there are any genuine values. There is simply the projection of our attitudes onto axiologically neutral reality.

But we have to remember that Nietzsche uses ‘value’ / ‘values’ in two quite different senses. The descriptive sense is more social and anthropological. The other sense is more axiologically loaded. Nietzsche takes the ‘*value of these values*’ (GM, ‘Preface,’ 6) as a serious question to be considered, and not as a pleonasm, precisely because these two different senses of ‘value’ are at work. It is an open question for Nietzsche whether certain ‘values’ (in the descriptive sense) are really valuable.

We should then ask: In the places, such as this, where he talks about value being created or bestowed, what sense of values does he have in mind? As descriptive social or anthropological

²⁵ Leiter, “Against the Privilege Readings”; Hussain, “Honest Illusion”; Katsafanas, “Deriving Ethics from Action” also draws on this passage as evidence that Nietzsche thinks that “[t]here are no objective values, or there are no objective facts about what is valuable,” 624, and uses this to set up a puzzle, to which he offers his preferred form of constitutivism as the solution. If one, as I do, sees Nietzsche’s views about the objectivity of value as underdetermined, then this puzzle is more difficult to motivate. However, although Katsafanas rejects the idea of objective facts about value, value as such does not get eliminated as a complete chimera. It springs from us in virtue of power being the constitutive aim of action. For this reason, I would not classify his view with the other skeptical views I am criticizing.

²⁶ By way of comparison, note the charge he goes on to lay at Christianity’s doorstep in *The Antichrist*: ‘For one must understand this: every natural custom, every natural institution (state, judicial order, marriage, care of the sick and the poor), every demand inspired by the instinct of life—in short, everything that contains its value *in itself* [*was seinen Werth in sich hat*] is made altogether valueless, *anti-valuable* by the parasitism of the priest (or the ‘moral world order’)... (A, 26). In castigating the priests, he explicitly refers to ‘everything that has its value in itself’—on this reading anyway, thus presupposing just what some take him to deny in *The Gay Science* (301). Although as with the GS passage (301) and the TSZ passage (I, “On the Thousand and One Goals”), I think the best reading may be one that does not see Nietzsche as here treating truly meta-axiological issues at all.

entities, values do indeed stem from us, when individuals, normative systems, and societies *take* or *proclaim* things to be valuable. Without humans to create them, there would be no such values. Nature, Nietzsche claims, is thus ‘*werthlos*’ (GS, 301), value-less, in this sense, just as it is money-less, art-less, museum-less, religion-less, ideology-less and all those other things that come into being only thanks to human beings. ‘Only we’, he says, ‘have created the world *that concerns man!*’ (GS, 301). We humans, on this reading, are here the ‘gift-givers’ in being essential to bringing values into being. As a social or anthropological category, value (like religion or money or art) surely cannot be independent of the activities and practices of human beings. But what of the fact of certain values *really being* valuable? Can *that* be independent of human practices of valuing? If the reading I am suggesting here is right, then that is plainly compatible with what Nietzsche says. Now, I readily admit that this passage *can* certainly be read in a more meta-axiologically ambitious way, and it has often been. My point is simply that we are not compelled to extract a skeptical meta-axiological theory from the text, when there is a plausible interpretive alternative. We should, I am thus urging, be careful not simply to assume that he is making dramatic meta-axiological claims, when it is not clear from the texts whether he is even making a distinctively meta-axiological point at all.

Suppose for the sake of argument, however, that he is meaning to pronounce on matters meta-axiological here. If so, we need to be precise in specifying just what he is denying in claiming that nature, in itself, is ‘valueless’ and that values come through a bestowal. This *could* be read as a matter of mere projection. But, on other construals, it is compatible with the existence of genuine values.²⁷ What one needs for this is simply the idea that the evaluative facts which ground genuine value are themselves not wholly mind-independent facts. Nietzsche might thus be suggesting, in the spirit of Euthyphro, that this ‘present’ of value, when bestowed by the right sort of people, *creates* genuine values.²⁸ When Euthyphro suggests that the gods’ loving something makes it pious, he

²⁷ Even Leiter, in his most recent work, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement”, seems now to have come around to this possibility.

²⁸ It would of course be a difficult question how to identify such people.

presumably is not claiming it is thereby pious *only for them*.²⁹ The beloved thing is thereby made pious *for everyone*, though it is not, ‘in itself’ or ‘by its nature’ pious. Nietzsche could have a similar view in mind about the grounding of values, perhaps with the genuine philosophers described in *Beyond Good and Evil* (211) as the creators of genuine value.³⁰ He could also have a view on which values are secondary qualities, and thus dependent for their status as values on humans and their sensibilities and proclivities.³¹ This would be a way for him to maintain that there are indeed genuine values, but that their being so is not a wholly mind-independent matter.

The key point here is general: even if Nietzsche denies the strong metaphysical objectivity of values, he doesn’t *thereby* undermine the possibility that there might be genuine values. So while we do not have enough evidence for attributing to him one of these meta-axiological views in particular, we also do not have enough evidence for attributing to him the view that no values enjoy genuine evaluative standing simply on the basis of his apparent remarks about values not being part of ‘nature’ or of mind-independent reality.

Nietzsche continues with these sorts of claims in his next book the following year, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the title character says similar things about humans being the ‘creators’ of values:

Only man placed values in things to preserve himself – he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning. Therefore he calls himself ‘man’, which means: the esteemer. To esteem is to create: hear this, you creators! Esteeming itself is of all esteemed things the most estimable treasure. Through esteeming first is there value [*Durch das Schätzen erst*

²⁹ *Euthyphro* 10d ff

³⁰ Alex Silk, “Nietzschean Constructivism”, argues for a constructivist reading in this vein.

³¹ My thanks to Errol Lord for suggesting this possibility as also potentially compatible with what Nietzsche says.

giebt es Werth]³²: and without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow. Hear this, you creators (TSZ, I, “On the Thousand and One Goals”).

It is, to be sure, notoriously difficult to extract philosophical doctrine from Zarathustra. But this should make us even more cautious that this passage is a straightforward brief in favor of axiological skepticism. This passage, similar to the one from *The Gay Science*, is just as naturally read as making a claim about values in the descriptive sense, as sociological or anthropological entities. Nietzsche, after all, is throughout this section emphasizing the human dimension in the creation of these sorts of descriptive values. He is encouraging us to realize that particular *value systems* have been the contingent creation of human beings at particular times in history, as the result of what they happen to esteem, whether honor or piety or loyalty or self-abnegation. ‘A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power’ (TSZ, *ibid.*). His aim in the passage, as I see it, is to explain how proclaiming and coming to regard certain things as valuable ends up furthering the interests (and the wills-to-power) of particular human communities and individuals. It could be that Nietzsche thinks there is *nothing beyond* this contingent esteeming by particular people. But nothing in the passage speaks strongly in favor of this, and nothing renders this skeptical reading more plausible than the alternative I am suggesting. It is just not clear that Nietzsche is addressing truly meta-axiological issues in this passage at all.

But, once again, let us suppose for the sake of argument that Nietzsche is meaning to offer a meta-axiological theory here. The text, again, is compatible with the two non-skeptical lines (the

³² Kaufmann renders this: ‘Through esteeming alone is there value’. This translation of ‘*erst*’ is most naturally read as prejudging the issue of whether esteeming *x* is a sufficient condition for *x* to be a value. It is making it seem as if being a value comes about *solely though* the esteeming. (Although, it bears pointing out that a partisan of gin martinis could intelligibly say, ‘Through gin alone is there a Martini’. This wouldn’t necessarily need to signal fondness for the Winston Churchill vermouth-free Martini. Instead, it can pick out *one salient element* against a background of other possibilities. I am in essence saying, as I believe is true, ‘The vodka martini is an aberration, a contradiction in terms. Though gin alone (*as opposed* to vodka, or rum or whatever) can a martini be made.’) If the ‘*erst*’ is, however, understood as ‘first’ or ‘primally’, also possible translations for it, then it is more clearly noting an essential ingredient, or perhaps even just a necessary background condition, for something being a value is that it be esteemed. It is not saying that being a value is *simply* a matter of this.

Euthyphro-inspired and secondary qualities views) that I just sketched, as well as with views, such as that recently defended by Joseph Raz, on which values are in a different way dependent on human valuers. According to Raz, values require valuers and a web of social practices to sustain them, and furthermore, new values, with genuine axiological standing, can rightfully be said to be created, in some sense, by human beings.³³ Though being regarded as valuable is not a sufficient condition for being valuable, it is a necessary one. Even if these views are not philosophically satisfying, all are intelligible positions. For reasons of space, I cannot explore any of them further here. My point, in any event, is a broader one about the range of philosophical options that the texts leave open: Nietzsche does not clearly opt for any views of this sort, but neither does he explicitly opt for a sort of eliminativism regarding the possibility of genuine values, including non-moral values. Thus, *even if* Nietzsche is talking about meta-axiology in these key passages, it is not clear what he takes to follow from the apparently anti-objective *metaphysics* of value about the possibility of genuine values nonetheless, since he never says that in order to be a genuine value, something would need to be *wholly mind-independent*. It is not clear that this Platonic commitment is one Nietzsche shares. In fact, that may be precisely what he is trying to call into question.

V. Perspectival Value

In order to lend more precision to the way in which Nietzsche thinks of values as potentially having (or lacking) objective standing, I'd now like to turn to consider Bernard Reginster's important recent interpretation. Reginster's interpretation is more nuanced than others in the sort of objectivity about the standing of values that it sees Nietzsche as rejecting. Reginster, it seems to me, is right to think that Nietzsche, throughout his career, rejects a Platonic metaphysics of value. Reginster goes further and shows that Nietzsche also rejects a more constructivist brand of Kantianism that would see values as grounded in facts about what we rationally could will.³⁴

³³ Raz, *The Practice of Value*.

³⁴ Whether such a form of constructivism is Kant's own meta-ethical view is another, more contentious matter that I will not consider here.

Reginster draws on Nietzsche's criticisms of Kant's practical philosophy, as well as on Nietzsche's notion of perspectivism, to make his exegetical case. According to Reginster, Nietzsche rejects (in Reginster's terms) the sort of 'normative objectivism' present in Plato and Kant and opts for a form of 'normative subjectivism' instead.³⁵

What is it that Reginster means by values being 'objective' (or, by contrast 'subjective') here? Reginster draws the line between the objective and the subjective in a way parallel to the debate about external reasons and internal reasons from contemporary meta-ethics. According to Reginster's 'normative subjectivism', something is valuable for me only if it is anchored in my subjective motivational set. Taking the Nietzschean notion of a perspective to be akin to a subjective motivational set, Reginster argues that in order for something to be a value *for me*, it has to be a value anchored in my own contingent evaluative perspective. The problem with forms of 'normative objectivism'—Platonism and the constructivist brand of Kantianism—is, according to Reginster's reconstruction of Nietzsche, that they neglect this and try to ground what is valuable for me—and indeed for everyone—in alleged facts about what is non-perspectivally valuable, in virtue of the metaphysically objective Form of the Good or facts about what any person (not me with my contingent desires in particular) rationally must will.

This is an intriguing suggestion. But my resistance to this reading comes down to how we are to construe the meta-axiological import of Nietzsche's perspectivism in this context. Perspectivism, on a more anthropological and less meta-axiological construal than Reginster's, might instead tell us that what people *take as valuable* depends on their perspective, in the sense that it depends on how their social situation and their psychological needs color their view of the world. If my perspective is one of the Christian, I will, Nietzsche thinks, probably take a life of devoted service to God to be the most valuable life for me. Because my entrenched commitments influence my way of looking at things, certain things will show up as valuable to me. This anthropological construal would seem to make quite good sense of the visual element of

³⁵ Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 58 ff.

Nietzsche's multifarious metaphor of a perspective. It is, in the first instance, a claim about how things look to people, in virtue of their position with respect to those things. It is a considerable step, however, to saying that a perspective, in a more idealist fashion, also influences how things axiologically are. For does my seeing things in this way—that is, from this perspective—*make it so*? Does this make things valuable for me?

There is a weaker and a stronger way for a perspective to play a role in determining whether something is valuable for a given person. The weaker version Nietzsche may well accept, given what might be described as his anti-Procrusteanism: There is no single way of life that is best for everyone (at least when that way of life is spelled out with some degree of specificity). A few are cut out to be free spirits, most to be slaves 'in some sense or other' (BGE, 257). What specific way of life is best for you, according to Nietzsche, depends on features of you, including your pre-existing and maybe intractable evaluative perspective. Thus, if you have a given set of features, including a given evaluative perspective, then the best sort of life (or range of lives, maybe) for you is such-and-such. But on the stronger reading of how a perspective makes it the case that something is valuable, the claim would be that the truth of that conditional itself—and, even more extremely, the truth of all value claims (for you)—is dependent on your perspective: That your perspective (specifically, its underpinnings in your desiderative economy) has it that a given life is the best life for you *makes it the case*, in this stronger way, that it is. That your perspective has it that such-and-such is valuable makes it the case that it is (for you). Some with certain Humean commitments will find this point congenial on independent philosophical grounds, but the question is whether it can be squared with Nietzsche's texts. I have my doubts, because it becomes very difficult to reconcile with his idea that an evaluative perspective might *itself* be radically faulty.

Some perspectives are jaundiced by 'life-negating' ideology. They may permit the agents who hold them to eke out meager survival. But it doesn't mean that these are the *accurate* evaluative perspectives, in the sense that they are adequate to the evaluative facts. In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche is very clear that perspectives can be inadequate to these facts:

Against this theologians' instinct I wage war: I have found its traces everywhere. Whoever has theologians' blood in his veins, sees all things in a distorted and dishonest perspective to begin with. The pathos which develops out of this condition calls itself *faith*: closing one's eyes to oneself once and for all, lest one suffer the sight of incurable falsehood. This erroneous [*fehlerhaften*] perspective on all things is elevated into a morality, a virtue, a holiness; the good conscience is tied to faulty vision; and no *other* perspective is conceded any further value once one's own has been made sacrosanct with the names of 'God', 'redemption', and 'eternity' [...] Whatever a theologian feels to be true *must* be false: this is almost a criterion of truth. His most basic instinct of self-preservation forbids him to respect reality at any point or even to let it get a word in. Wherever the theologians' instinct extends, *value judgments* have been stood on their heads and the concepts of 'true' and 'false' are of necessity reversed: whatever is most harmful to life is called 'true'; whatever elevates it, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it triumphant, is called 'false' (A, 9).

If Nietzsche thought perspectives were akin to subjective motivational sets, then there would be no way for *they themselves* to be false. But that is just what he appears to think in this passage.

Perhaps one can make a better case for this strong reading of the relation between perspectives and values based on the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche sets up perspectivism as an alternative to Platonism about value, lambasting Plato's 'invention' of 'the pure spirit [*reinen Geiste*] and the good in itself' [*Guten an sich*]. This Platonic way of looking at things, Nietzsche says, amounts to 'standing truth on her head and denying [*verleugnen*] *perspective*, the basic condition of all life'. One might take this as grist for the mill and think that Nietzsche is denying the possibility that anything is valuable, except relative to the contingent evaluative perspective of a given person. But there is considerable space between denying that Platonic picture and moving to a view on which our motivational sets make it the case that things are valuable for

us. We canvassed in Section IV some ways in which Nietzsche might be read as denying the complete metaphysical objectivity of genuine values, by insisting there is some important human contribution (Euthypro-style response dependence, a secondary qualities view, a social dependence view, etc.). The Platonic form of the good would be denying that there is *any* human contribution like this, and this may well be what Nietzsche is meaning to challenge in criticizing Plato's 'denial' of perspective in this context.

I think there is an even more modest reading still. The dogmatist's error is, in Kaufmann's translation, to 'deny' [*verleugnen*] perspective. But what does this mean? We could think of it as a philosophical thesis: namely, the denial that the good has any perspectival element. That was the view I just considered. But *verleugnen* can also mean 'to disown' or 'to repudiate'. This is to refuse to be associated with something, to think it is beneath one's dignity or to think it would sully one's honor to do so. When the conservative parents 'disown' or 'repudiate' their lesbian daughter, they are rejecting her, not giving up belief in her very existence. On my preferred reading, the dogmatist is not only denying perspective, in the sense of holding an aperspectival theory of the good, which Plato certainly does, but also *disowning* or *repudiating* perspectives as important objects of philosophical study.

Nietzsche sets his own way of philosophizing up as an alternative to the dogmatist's. Whereas the dogmatist's only concern is investigating the truth about the right values and about other enduring philosophical questions, Nietzsche is a perspectivist because he is *also* interested in investigating people's *perspectives* on these questions, including the question of what is valuable. This, I think, is one of the reasons Nietzsche's philosophy is so difficult to assimilate into the philosophical tradition. Most philosophers are interested just in the eternal truth about metaphysics, epistemology, morality, and so on. Nietzsche is unusual in being just as interested in why people believe what they do about these subjects—in particular what physiological, psychological, historical, and social factors incline them to hold the views that they do.

The trouble with dogmatic philosophizing, exemplified in Plato most especially, is its single-minded concern with the timeless truths about what really is the case. These are thought the only truths worth philosophy's attention. It repudiates, as unworthy of truly philosophical inquiry, this whole other range of interesting truths about *why* people come to believe what they do on these issues. Nietzsche, on the contrary, thinks that these perspectives are a fertile area of inquiry. Consider Part I of *Beyond Good and Evil*, coming right on the heels of his complaint that Plato has 'denied' or 'disowned' perspective. Nietzsche spends much of this section, 'On the Prejudices of Philosophers', discussing why past philosophers have been tempted by the views they have. So too in Parts III and V, where his concerns are with the human phenomena of religion and morality respectively, recurring themes for him before and after *Beyond Good and Evil*. His concern, when it comes to these phenomena, is just as much with why people hold these views as with giving arguments for what the right views in the field are.

But to treat the issue of Nietzsche's perspectivism in detail is far beyond my scope here. My own suspicion is that he has no unified *doctrine* of perspectivism, but rather an interestingly pregnant metaphor with a range of possible interpretations. I have just meant tentatively to sketch an alternative interpretative possibility, insofar as that metaphor might be drawn upon in order to shed light on Nietzsche's value theory. On my proposed reading, Nietzsche can be understood as getting at something much less meta-axiologically ambitious with his perspectivism than interpreters have often held. In any event, given that the understanding of perspectives as akin to subjective motivational sets is incompatible with what Nietzsche says in *The Antichrist* and its not necessitated by what he says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, we can construe perspectivism, I suggest, as a minimal thesis about what value *judgments* an agent's psychological and social condition will incline her to make. If we accept this less meta-axiologically ambitious understanding of perspectivism, then we can reject Platonism about value and the Kantian rationalist-constructivist thesis without needing to go so far as to accept what Reginster calls 'normative subjectivism' as Nietzsche's view about the standing of values. We can think that while there are objective (in some

weak sense) facts about value, these needn't be anchored in Platonic truths, nor need they be constructed out of the deliverances of practical reason. They might, however, be objective in the sense that they needn't be dependent on being rooted in a person's subjective motivational set in order to have the evaluative standing for that person that they do.³⁶

VI. Conclusion

One of the major obstacles thus far to seeing Nietzsche as, in some sense, a value realist—and by that I just mean someone who is not doubtful that there are genuine values—is that it has been argued that *if* he is realist about value, then he must be read as trying to ground all value in the will to power. And given that the latter project, judging from the works he chose to publish, is not clearly Nietzsche's and is of dubious philosophical merits on its own terms, Nietzsche, this argument goes, must not be read as accepting realism about value.³⁷ But that is a particularly implausible variant of value realism both textually and philosophically. By showing that Nietzsche shouldn't be attributed such a strongly reductionist view about what features of the world ground value, one does not thereby foreclose the idea that he is realist of *some stripe* about value. The value theory suggested in the published works is more pluralistic in what it suggests as the bearers of value.³⁸ Here we move into the territory of issues that are no longer in Nietzsche's second-order meta-axiology, but in his first-order theory of what is valuable. Working that out is not the project of this paper. But the point relevant for our discussion here is this: If Nietzsche is a realist about value,

³⁶ The idea that values must be anchored in one's desiderative economy in order to have the standing that they do depends, it seems to me, on the overly *practical* way of conceiving of all values that I was urging caution about before. Just what import is the internalist motivational claim supposed to be have, if we construe the structure of values in less practical terms, more along the lines of aesthetic evaluation than along the lines of practical reasons for action? Can't there just be a question about what is valuable and whether some judgments of value are more accurate than others? Need all these questions be translated into questions about what is to be done by given agents and whether individual agents could be motivated to do those things?

³⁷ Leiter, "Against the Privilege Readings," 280.

³⁸ Peter Railton has sketched what seems to me to be a pluralistic realist view in his "Nietzsche's Normative Theory?"

we do not need to see him as trying to reduce all values to exercises of the will to power, a questionable idea he toys with only in notebook passages he never publishes.³⁹

The puzzle typically arises for those working on Nietzsche's value theory about what his views on issues of meta-ethics and meta-axiology were. The answer, I suspect, is that his thoughts on these topics do not amount to a clear position. While one can certainly seek to develop a meta-axiology *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. In contrast to his provocative perfectionism and to his groundbreaking anthropology of morality and critique of the same, topics on which what Nietzsche has to say is vastly more developed, his meta-axiology is just not, in my opinion, where his interests or his strengths as a philosopher lie. I have not, however, tried to establish that here. I have worked in this paper toward a modest conclusion: Given that his expressed views do not foreclose the possibility that he grants evaluative standing to the perfectionistic values he champions, we should at least leave open this possibility. The Nietzsche that so many philosophers think they know—the Nietzsche who is alleged to be skeptical that there are any genuine values—is just not the philosopher to whom his texts straightforwardly point

Of course, it is a general feature of Nietzsche's aphoristic and poetic philosophical style that numerous positions can be extracted from the text. Proponents of the skeptical readings may agree that the texts don't decisively settle the question of his meta-axiology, but on balance, still think that their view is the best reading of the texts. Now, we can all acknowledge that Nietzsche is critical of many of the values (in the descriptive sense) that we have inherited and is dubious about the spurious legitimacy that they claim for themselves. But does he go beyond this, so as to be skeptical

³⁹ Cf., WP, 55 [KSA, 13:422-27]; WP, 674 [KSA, 13:39-40].

of the very idea that anything is *really* valuable? This has the surprising and, to my mind, unsatisfying result that Nietzsche thinks the great multitude laboring under a form of ideology are not *mistaken* in their outlook. It could be that Nietzsche thinks this. Yet at the risk of defanging Nietzsche's impassioned critique of the ideologies we have inherited, this seems to me a position of last resort.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I am grateful to audiences at Princeton University, Oxford University, the University of Virginia, and the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin for helpful discussion following presentations of this material. My thanks as well to Alexander Nehamas, Anthony Cross, Benjamin Kiesewetter, and Errol Lord, as well as three anonymous referees for this journal for their written comments in response to this paper.

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