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# Nietzsche's Art of Interpretation: The Role of the Epigraph in GM III

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# NIETZSCHE'S ART OF INTERPRETATION: THE ROLE OF THE EPIGRAPH IN *GM* III

by

RYAN E. MCCOY

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Prior to the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche affixes a fragment from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The purpose of the fragment seems explicit in the *Genealogy's* preface where Nietzsche tells us that the essay is a commentary on an aphorism. However, the relationship of the fragment to the third essay is unclear. In response, several commentators have offered a solution: namely, to disregard the fragment from *Zarathustra* and to read the first section of the third essay as the object of Nietzsche's commentary. Since this reading, the puzzle concerning Nietzsche's aphorism has been considered solved. In this thesis, I make a case for (i) why we should revive this debate, (ii) why we should restore the most natural reading of the preface, which makes the fragment from *Zarathustra* the aphorism Nietzsche refers to there, and (iii) how we can make sense of its connection to the third essay.

INDEX WORDS: Nietzsche, Pyrrhonian Skepticism, Sextus Empiricus, German Philosophy

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by

RYAN E. MCCOY

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Works by Nietzsche

- A     *The Anti-Christ*, translated by Judith Norman, in Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (eds.), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- BGE   *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Judith Norman, in Rolf-Peter Hortsman and Judith Norman (eds.), *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- EH     *Ecce Homo*, translated by Judith Norman, in Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (eds.), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- GM     *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudmarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
- KSA    Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, edited Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).
- TI     *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by Judith Norman, in Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (eds.), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Z     *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, in Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1954).

### Other Works

- PH     Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, translated by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Prior to the third essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche affixes a short epigraph from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The epigraph reads, “Carefree, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants *us*: she is a woman, she always loves only a warrior” (GM III Epigraph). The purpose of the epigraph is seemingly made explicit in the *Genealogy*’s preface. There he writes, “In the third treatise of this book I have offered a sample of what I call ‘interpretation [*Auslegung*]’ in such a case:—an aphorism [*ein Aphorismus*] is placed before this treatise, the treatise itself is a commentary on it” (GM P 8). Yet the relationship of the epigraph to the third essay as a whole is unclear, given the epigraph’s mystifying content: How are we to connect the images of “wisdom” and “warrior” to Nietzsche’s discussion of the “meaning” of ascetic ideals?

Several commentators, including Maudemarie Clark, Christopher Janaway, and John Wilcox, have offered a solution: namely, to disregard the epigraph from *Zarathustra* and to read the first section of the third essay as the object of Nietzsche’s interpretation and commentary.<sup>1</sup> In short, these commentators have argued that the first section (GM III 1) is Nietzsche’s aphorism, given that it outlines the entire essay (GM III) in condensed form. The epigraph from *Zarathustra* is just a test for readers, meant to distract us from seeing the first section as Nietzsche’s aphorism. On this reading, the *Zarathustra* epigraph is at best tangentially related to the third essay.

Since the inception of this reading, which I call the “standard view,” the debate concerning Nietzsche’s aphorism in the *Genealogy* has died out. If we consider as a sample the recent commentaries and monographs on the *Genealogy*, we see that scholars now take the standard view put forth by Clark, Janaway, and Wilcox as veritable fact. For example, Brian

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<sup>1</sup> This reading was first argued for by Clark (1997), Janaway (1997), Wilcox (1997).

Leiter in his *Nietzsche on Morality* refers to GM III 1 as “the epigraph to [the third essay.]”<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Hatab in his commentary on the *Genealogy* goes so far as to say that “John Wilcox, Maudemarie Clark, and Christopher Janaway have shown conclusively that the aphorism in question is actually [GM III 1.]”<sup>3</sup> In the following, I make a case for (i) why we should revive this debate, (ii) why we should restore the most natural reading of the preface, which makes the epigraph from *Zarathustra* the aphorism Nietzsche refers to there, and (iii) how we can make sense of its connection to the third essay.

I begin with an assessment of the “standard view” and show how this reading involves speculation beyond textual evidence, as well as how it fails to account for Nietzsche’s novel use of ‘interpretation [*Auslegung*]’ introduced in the preface. Following my case for why we should reassess the standard view, I explain what Nietzsche means by the “art of interpretation [*Kunst der Auslegung*]” and argue that this involves the skeptical tactic of presenting equipollent arguments, a technique associated with Pyrrhonian skepticism in which the skeptic opposes a given dogmatic claim with an interpretation or argument of equal force. The result is not the assertion of any new dogmatic claim, but rather suspension of judgment on the matter in general. I then give a brief synopsis of the *Genealogy*’s third essay in order to illuminate Nietzsche’s characterization of the ascetic ideal as an unrivaled “system of interpretation [*System von Interpretation*]” (GM III 23). This will make clear why Nietzsche’s art of interpretation is significant for combatting the ascetic ideal. In the final section, I show how Nietzsche’s attack on the ascetic ideal in the third essay is a commentary on the *Zarathustra* epigraph, and

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<sup>2</sup> Leiter (2002: 264).

<sup>3</sup> Hatab (2008: 113). One exception to the general consensus regarding the “standard view” is Marsden (2006) who argues that GM III 1 does not accord with any orthodox meaning of the term “aphorism.” However, Marsden’s argument is itself problematic when we consider that Nietzsche refers to a variety of works as aphoristic that contain aphorisms much longer than GM III 1, e.g. *Human, All too Human* (GM Preface 2).

furthermore, that both the work and character *Zarathustra*, referred to in the epigraph, provide an ideal that opposes the ascetic ideal in the third essay.

The reading presented in the following has several advantages. Previous commentators have not done justice either to the role of the epigraph or to what Nietzsche means by the art of interpretation. My reading gives the epigraph a definite role in the third essay. Moreover, it squares with Nietzsche's remarks in the preface to the *Genealogy* that he is offering a sample of the art of interpretation, and furthermore shows how equipollence is a tactic employed in his struggle against the ascetic ideal.

## 2 ASSESSING THE STANDARD VIEW

On the standard view of the third essay, the aphorism mentioned in the preface of the *Genealogy* is the first section of the third essay, which I quote here in full.<sup>4</sup>

What do ascetic ideals mean?—Among artists nothing or too many different things; among philosophers and scholars something like a nose and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality; among women, at best, one *more* charming trait of seduction, a little *morbidezza* on beautiful flesh, the angelicalness of a pretty, fat animal; among the physiologically failed and out of sorts (among the *majority* of mortals) an attempt to appear to oneself to be “too good” for this world, a holy form of excess, their principal instrument in the battle with slow pain and with boredom; among priests the true priests' faith, their best tool of power, also the “most high” permission to power; among saints, finally, a pretext for hibernation, their *novissima gloriae cupido*, their rest in nothingness (“God”), their form of madness. *That* the ascetic ideal has meant so much to man, however, is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its *horror vacui*: *it needs a goal*,—and it would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.—Am I

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<sup>4</sup> While Janaway holds that the aphorism is only *part* of GM III 1, ending at “madness,” Wilcox (1997) cites GM III 1 in full. The latter suggestion seems more plausible, given the lack of textual evidence for Janaway's division; we have no evidence that Nietzsche expects his readers to make such an arbitrary division. Furthermore, Janaway states that his variation from Wilcox is negligible (2007: 170n). Thus, in order to present the stronger reading, we should say that on the standard view GM III 1 is the aphorism Nietzsche mentions in the preface.

understood? Have I been understood? ... “*Absolutely not! dear Sir!*”—Then let us start at the beginning. (GM III 1)<sup>5</sup>

In this section we find several themes addressed in the third essay: namely, the meaning of ascetic ideals for artists, for philosophers, for scholars, and for priests. On the standard view, the first section is the best candidate for Nietzsche’s aphorism because it outlines the content of the third essay. Thus, Nietzsche’s “art of interpretation” would have us expand these points, and would make the *Zarathustra* epigraph basically irrelevant—an interpretive test. On this reading, Nietzsche’s interpretative test would thus have his readers recognize that the *Zarathustra* epigraph is nothing more than a red herring meant to distract us from performing an exegesis of his intended object of interpretation, GM III 1.

At first glance, this reading alleviates a major interpretive problem. The role of the epigraph from *Zarathustra* and how it relates to Nietzsche’s discussion of the ascetic ideal is not initially apparent. Trying to connect his remark on wisdom being a woman and loving only warriors to the meaning of ascetic ideals for various human types seems to require a far-reaching interpretive endeavor, characterized by one commentator as “demand[ing] a feat so magical as to tax the reader’s ingenuity not only to the limit, but well beyond.”<sup>6</sup> Prior to the standard view, commentators attempted to do just that by unsuccessfully connecting the images of “wisdom,” “woman,” and “warrior” to the third essay.<sup>7</sup> If we can avoid having to draw these connections, we avoid the woes of previous commentators; if the first section of GM III, which reads like a summary of the essay’s content, is the aphorism, then we need only see how Nietzsche expands

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<sup>5</sup> Another problem with the standard view is that at the end of the third essay Nietzsche writes, “And, to say again *at the end* what I said *at the beginning*: man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will...” (GM III 28, emphasis added). If section one is “*the beginning*” of the third essay, then it cannot be the aphorism because, according to the preface, Nietzsche’s aphorism is *before* the beginning.

<sup>6</sup> Janaway (2007: 168-9).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of readings prior to the standard view, see Nehamas (1985: 114) and Danto (1986: 13).

these points in the remainder of the treatise. On this reading, Nietzsche's art of interpretation becomes, as Janaway suggests, "less extreme."<sup>8</sup>

Yet several interpretive problems remain. In addressing these problems we should remind ourselves of Nietzsche's remarks in the preface and what we should be looking for in our candidate for the aphorism:

An aphorism honestly coined and cast has not been "deciphered [*entziffert*]" simply because it has been read through; rather its *interpretation* [*Auslegung*] must now begin, and for this an art of interpretation [*Kunst der Auslegung*] is needed. In the third treatise of this book I have offered a sample of what I call "interpretation" in such a case:—an aphorism is placed before this treatise, the treatise itself is a commentary on it. Admittedly, to practice reading as an *art* in this way one thing above all is necessary, something which these days has been forgotten better than anything else—and it will therefore be a while before my writings are "readable"—something for which one must almost be a cow and in any case *not* a "modern man": *ruminating*.... (GM P 8)

Nietzsche clearly states that the aphorism up for interpretation is placed *before* the third essay. If section one (GM III 1) *belongs to* the third essay, then we are hard-pressed to conclude that the first section is the aphorism in question. Maudmarie Clark recognizes this problem and takes it up in her examination of the manuscripts and materials related to the publication of the *Genealogy*. Clark observes that the draft version of the third essay began with what is now §2. Both §8 of the preface and §1 of the third essay were added after the completion of what are now §§24–28. Thus §1 of the third essay and §8 of the preface, which alludes to the interpretation of an aphorism, were added to the *Genealogy* simultaneously. Clark and others have cited this as "overwhelming evidence" that §1 of the third essay is the aphorism mentioned in §8 of the preface.<sup>9</sup> However, Clark admits that the *Zarathustra* epigraph may also have been added at that

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<sup>8</sup> Janaway (2007: 165).

<sup>9</sup> Clark (1997: 614).

time. No records exist that pinpoint when Nietzsche added the *Zarathustra* epigraph, and Clark speculates that Nietzsche's instructions for adding the epigraph might have been lost. The lack of philological evidence regarding when Nietzsche added the *Zarathustra* epigraph therefore warrants our caution in ruling it out as the aphorism.

A further problem of the standard reading is that it does not provide a satisfying account of the *art* of interpretation that Nietzsche refers to in the preface. The latter half of GM P 8 concerning the need for 'ruminating' squares nicely with the standard view; the art of interpretation would require an elaboration on the points made in the first section. But what makes this interpretation "artful"? Certainly there is still some exegesis to be done. However, if the third essay merely expands these points in greater detail, then it seems hardly worth using the term 'interpretation' in a novel sense, nor does it indicate how our work would require the cultivation of any particular "art." Janaway argues for a "less extreme" reading of the aphorism, but what Janaway proposes seems not only inconsistent with the novelty in interpretation that Nietzsche demands, but in fact requires a *more extreme* reading. On his version of the standard view, we would have to imagine the bizarre possibility that Nietzsche is inventing a whole new term of art just for the act of understanding how an introductory paragraph relates to the body of an essay.

We can level a similar charge at the understanding of the role of the epigraph as a "test" for readers. The standard view requires us to see that the epigraph serves no purpose; it is merely a deceptive ornament. In other words, the standard view requires us to imagine that Nietzsche places the epigraph there *for no good reason at all*. How or why Nietzsche would reasonably expect us to pass such a test is unclear, nor is it clear *what kind of skill* Nietzsche intends to foster in his readership through the identification of the epigraph as a deceptive ornament.

Furthermore this reading entails the speculation that Nietzsche is deceiving his readership—a claim for which there is no textual evidence.<sup>10</sup>

That the standard view requires such speculation should force us to reevaluate its merits. In what follows, I provide an alternative to the standard view, one that addresses these insufficiencies and explains the relationship between Nietzsche’s art of interpretation and the discussion of ascetic ideals in the third essay. In order to clarify how the third essay is an interpretation of the *Zarathustra* epigraph, we first need to understand what Nietzsche means by the “art of interpretation.”

### 3 EQUIPOLLENCE AND THE ART OF INTERPRETATION

As I noted above, few commentators have given adequate attention to Nietzsche’s comment about the “art of interpretation”; they have not asked how Nietzsche’s use of interpretation is unique or artful. In addressing this question, I begin with an excerpt from *Beyond Good and Evil* §22.<sup>11</sup>

You must forgive an old philologist like me who cannot help maliciously putting his finger on bad arts of interpretation [*schlechte Interpretations-Künste*]: but this ‘conformity of nature to law’, which you physicists are so proud of, just as if — exists only because of your interpretation and bad ‘philology’. It is not a matter of fact, not a ‘text’, but instead only a naïve humanitarian correction and a distortion of meaning that you use in order to comfortably accommodate the democratic

<sup>10</sup> Blackman (2010) levels a similar charge at our understanding the role of the epigraph as a test for readers, but he nevertheless concludes that Nietzsche’s aphorism is GM III 1.

<sup>11</sup> Blackman invokes this passage in his attempt to explain Nietzsche’s art of interpretation. According to Blackman, Nietzsche’s art of interpretation would have us, his readers, falsify a set of facts (in this case, nature) by understanding it as the effect of some cause (e.g., “conformity to law” or “power”). The art of reading Nietzsche mentions in the preface requires us to recognize when such falsification has taken place. Ultimately, Blackman concludes that Nietzsche’s exercise in the art of interpretation is meant to teach us “to distinguish fact from fiction” (2010: 700). Blackman points to a helpful passage for understanding Nietzsche’s art of interpretation, but his insistence on “causal explanation” and his distinction between the art of reading and the art of interpretation is both problematic and beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate.

instincts of the modern soul! ‘Everywhere, equality before the law, – in this respect, nature is no different and not better off than we are’: a lovely case of ulterior motivation [...]. But, as I have said, this is interpretation, not text; and somebody with an opposite mode of interpretation could come along and be able to read from the same nature, and with reference to the same set of appearances, a tyrannically ruthless and pitiless execution of power claims [...]. Granted, this is only an interpretation too – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well then, so much the better. (BGE 22, quoted in part)<sup>12</sup>

In this passage Nietzsche is comparing two interpretations of a single set of facts. The first is the scientist’s assertion that nature works according to law. The second interpretation ‘reads’ the same set of facts, i.e. nature, but suggests an alternative explanation in terms of power.

In her reading of BGE 22, Jessica Berry has noted that Nietzsche, by pitting these two interpretations against one another, is employing the skeptical tactic of equipollence.<sup>13</sup> Equipollence is simply the quality of two disparate arguments being equally forceful. Thus in the example above, Nietzsche is combatting the scientists’ dogmatic claim with a claim of equal force using the same set of appearances; the effect of employing this counter-interpretation is to induce a state of *ephexis*, or suspension of judgment on the matter itself—that is, to induce the effect of being equally pulled by both sides of the dispute. ‘Bad philology’ in this case is the scientists’ dogmatic claim about the ‘text’ of nature, and it is ‘bad’ on Nietzsche’s view because it is dogmatic.

A significant feature of this skeptical reading is that in appealing to metaphysical “power claims” Nietzsche is not putting forth his own doctrine of “will to power,” but rather showing the

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<sup>12</sup> Translation slightly modified. We can see that Nietzsche’s use of interpretation in BGE 22 provides good evidence for his use of the term in the *Genealogy* when we consider that, following the title page, Nietzsche writes that the *Genealogy* is “appended to the recently published *Beyond Good and Evil* as a supplement and clarification.” This should alert us that the two works are explicitly and intimately connected with one another, and furthermore make plausible the connection between the terminology employed in both.

<sup>13</sup> Berry (2011: 125-6).

inconclusiveness of the scientists' metaphysical claim. The activity of the skeptic aims to undermine dogmatism without asserting new dogma. That Nietzsche is not advancing a position that he himself endorses is apparent in his use of the hypothetical mood and of the third person—"somebody with an opposite mode of interpretation *could* come along and be able to read from the same nature, and with reference to the same set of appearances"—as well as in his noting that these "power claims" are, too, "only interpretation" (BGE 22, emphasis added). He seems hardly concerned that the "power claims" interpretation holds on its own; he is content to cast it out as skeptical fodder. If Nietzsche were to take a doctrine of "power claims" as a definitive doctrine, he would fall into the very dogmatism that he is trying to undermine.

We find a similar passage that corroborates this reading in one of his later works, *The Anti-Christ*. There, much like his criticism of the scientists' "bad philology" in BGE 22, Nietzsche levels a charge against the theologians and Christian priests. He writes,

Another mark of a theologian is his *incapacity for philology*. Philology should be understood here in a very general sense, as the art of reading well,—to be able to read facts *without* falsifying them through interpretation, *without* letting the desire to understand make you lose caution, patience, subtlety. Philology as *ephexis* in interpretation [*Philologie als Ephexis in der Interpretation*]: whether it concerns books, newspaper articles, destinies, or facts about the weather—not to mention 'salvation of the soul'. (A 52)

Nietzsche, of course, identifies himself as a philologist throughout his corpus, but we see here how this activity goes beyond the interpretation of texts in the standard sense. Philology, in Nietzsche's broad sense, is an activity that permeates all the various facets of life and perception; it is a disposition towards the world that encompasses not only "caution, patience, subtlety," but suspension of judgment on matters ranging from the quotidian to the theoretical.

In the preface of the *Genealogy* Nietzsche characterizes the art of interpretation as "something which these days has been forgotten [*verlernt*] better than anything else."

Understanding this art of interpretation as *ephexis* in interpretation, overcomes yet another insufficiency of the standard view: the standard view leaves it unclear how the “art of interpretation” is a skill that has been long forgotten, if all it amounts to is just some exegetical expansion of points briefly made. But in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche emphasizes that this philological skill *has* disappeared:

The entire work of the ancient world *in vain*: I do not have words to express my feeling at something so enormous [...] What was the point of the Greeks? What was the point of the Romans?—All the presuppositions for a scholarly culture, all the scientific *methods* were already there, the great, incomparable art of reading well had already been established—this presupposition for the unity of culture, for the unity of science; natural science was on the very best path, together with mathematics and mechanics,—the *factual sense*, the last and most valuable of all the senses had schools and traditions that were already centuries old! (A 59)

In the time of the Greeks and Romans, “the great, incomparable art of reading well had already been established” (*ibid.*). Through the rise and dominance of Christian priests and theologians incapable of philology, what had been established in Greco-Roman culture quickly became unlearned; the skeptical, *ephectic* disposition of the ancients gave way to the dogmatism of Christianity. Nietzsche’s works will remain, as he says, *unreadable* until this dogmatism gives way to a skeptical readership.

So BGE 22 is an example of Nietzsche’s art of interpretation, and this passage, and other passages I will discuss later, from *Anti-Christ* confirm that this art of interpretation is skeptical and is the skill that contemporaries have unlearned. What follows for reading both the third essay of the *Genealogy* and Nietzsche’s corpus as a whole? First, Nietzsche’s art of interpretation restricts the class of those who will understand him to those who are capable of the same subtlety and skepticism in interpreting his texts—a point which runs parallel with Sextus Empiricus’ description of skepticism as an *ability* to set out opposition and not simply the adoption of a

theoretical position (PH I.26). Second, where Nietzsche seemingly proffers one positive interpretation in place of another, we need to proceed with caution; if Nietzsche provides an equipollent interpretation, then he is not committed to the position he introduces. As we will see in the following sections, both criticisms, against the scientists and the theologians and priests, are repeated in the third essay, and they show how equipollence is used to combat the dogmatism of the ascetic ideal.

#### **4 THE POWER OF THE ASCETIC IDEAL: A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION**

As I noted earlier, the first section of the third essay more or less outlines the essay's contents. There Nietzsche poses the question of the meaning of ascetic ideals, and lists several figures that appear over the course of the third essay. In §§2–10 Nietzsche deals with the meaning of ascetic ideals for artists and philosophers, and in §§11–23 for ascetic priests and their “physiologically failed” followers.

One commentator notes that in his movement from artists to philosophers to ascetic priests, Nietzsche is leading up to the ascetic ideal *par excellence*.<sup>14</sup> In his example of Wagner, the artist's instincts towards asceticism are shown in Wagner's dependence on the philosophy of Schopenhauer (GM III 5). For philosophers, the conditions under which they could practice philosophy were parasitic on the institutions and practices of the ascetic priests. As a consequence, philosophers have borne similarities to the ascetic priests: in their instincts towards life-denial, hatred of the body and the senses, and so on (GM III 10). However, neither artists nor philosophers are paradigms of the ascetic ideal, since both can flourish without any strict adherence to it. (As a counter-example to Wagner, for instance, an artist like Goethe creates

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<sup>14</sup> Migotti (2015: 346).

independently of ascetic ideals (GM III 2).) And philosophers are dependent on the ascetic ideal only instrumentally, insofar as it provides the conditions for their theoretical inquiry. In contrast, the priests are entirely dependent on ideals of self-denial. Regarding this dependency, Nietzsche writes, “[the ascetic priest’s] *right* to existence stands and falls with that ideal” (GM III 11). While artists and philosophers turned out not to be ideal exemplars, with the priests and their followers we have the ascetic ideal in lucid form.

Having identified the various meanings of the ascetic ideal by §23, we might expect Nietzsche to conclude the third essay. However, Nietzsche adds that the examination of artists, philosophers, and ascetic priests was only preparatory for what he calls “the last and most terrible aspect that the question of the meaning of this ideal has”: namely, the power of the ascetic ideal (GM III 23). He writes,

What does the very *power* of this ideal mean, the *enormity* of its power? Why has it been given room to this extent? Why has there not been better resistance? The ascetic ideal expresses a will: *where* is the opposing will in which an *opposing ideal* expresses itself? The ascetic ideal has a *goal*—it is general enough that all other interests of human existence appear small-minded and narrow measured against it; *it relentlessly interprets ages, peoples, human beings* according to this one goal, *it refuses to tolerate any other interpretation*, any other goal, it rejects, negates, affirms, confirms solely in accordance with *its* interpretation (—and was there ever a system of interpretation more thoroughly thought to the end?) (GM III 23, emphasis added)

The ascetic ideal provides a “system of interpretation”—a scheme through which its adherents interpret the world and generate meaning. Thus far, the ascetic ideal has remained so powerful precisely because it has found no ideal to combat it.

In a later passage, Nietzsche explains further why this ascetic “system of interpretation” has been unrivaled. He writes,

The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity—and *the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning!*

Thus far it has been the only meaning; any meaning is better than no meaning at all; in every respect the ascetic ideal has been the “*faute de mieux*” *par excellence* there has been thus far. In it suffering was *interpreted*; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door fell shut to all suicidal nihilism. The interpretation—there is no doubt—brought new suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, gnawing more at life: it brought all suffering under the perspective of *guilt* ... But in spite of all this—man was *rescued* by it, he had a *meaning*, he was henceforth no longer like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense, “without-sense,” now he could *will* something—no matter for the moment in what direction, to what end, with what he willed: *the will itself was saved*. (GM III 28)

The scheme of interpretation provided by the ascetic ideal answers the various metaphysical queries that haunt human existence: questions concerning death, the afterlife, suffering, and purpose. Importantly, the ascetic ideal provides an interpretation of existence according to which suffering is meaningful. Through its interpretation the ascetic ideal mitigates the “suicidal nihilism” that results from the inability to justify suffering. However, this system of interpretation has come at the cost of the psycho-physiological health of its adherents—the “gnawing” suffering of guilt and suppression.

Turning to those we might take to be the ascetic ideal’s most likely opponents, Nietzsche shifts from the ascetic priests to science and scholars. Science lays claim to independence of the ascetic ideal, and by most accounts should help dispel the religious and metaphysical illusions of the ascetic ideal. Contrary to appearances, however, Nietzsche shows that these two dissimilar enterprises are unified; though it seems to be the antagonist *par excellence*, science is firmly rooted in the ascetic ideal.

These two, science and ascetic ideal, they do, after all, stand on one and the same ground—I have already suggested that this is so—: namely on the same overestimation of truth (more correctly: on the same belief in the *inassessability*, the *uncriticizability* of truth), precisely in this they are *necessarily* confederates—so that, supposing one combats them, they can only be combatted and called into question together. (GM III 25)

Science is aligned with the ascetic ideal in its overestimation of the value of truth. Nietzsche's criticism of science echoes his remarks in BGE 22. What he finds admirable about science, when it is at its best, is its skeptical and critical activity. However, like the scientists in BGE 22 who appeal to the metaphysical principle of nature's conformity to law, the scientific enterprise as described in the third essay, under the sway of ascetic ideals, presupposes the metaphysical and unquestionable value of truth. By overestimating the value of truth, science appeals to the same drive for certainty that compels both the ascetic priests and their followers.

## 5 ZARATHUSTRA AS COUNTER-IDEAL: THE ROLE OF THE EPIGRAPH

The outlook at the conclusion of the *Genealogy* seems bleak, as Nietzsche never provides an “opposing ideal” to the interpretive system of the ascetic ideal—as what seemed to be the most likely rival to the ascetic ideal, science, was shown to be one of its confederates. Yet, reflecting on the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo*, he suggests a possible competitor through the work (and character) of *Zarathustra*.

The third essay gives the answer to the question of how the ascetic ideal, the priestly ideal, acquired such incredible *power* despite the fact that it is the detrimental idea *par excellence*, a will to the end, a decadence ideal. Answer: *not* because God is at work behind priests, as is believed, but instead *faute de mieux*—because it has been the only ideal so far, because it has not had any competition. ‘Because people would rather will nothingness than *not* will’ ... Above all, there was no *counter-ideal*—until *Zarathustra*.—I have been understood. (EH “Books: Genealogy”)

In *Zarathustra* there are, as one commentator has noted, several teachings that “offer a genuine alternative to prevailing Christian ascetic [values].”<sup>15</sup> Another has observed that even this bleak conclusion of the *Genealogy* points us to the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where

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<sup>15</sup> Von Tevenar (2013: 293).

Zarathustra gives a new meaning to human existence through a new goal: the superhuman [*Übermensch*] (Z P 7).<sup>16</sup> Thus it seems that *Zarathustra* and the new goal of the superman are meant to replace the ascetic ideal's will to nothingness. However, that Nietzsche is giving us any prescriptive or positive project seems highly unlikely. In *Ecce Homo* he goes to great lengths to guard his readership against appropriating his works as prescriptions for living. He writes, "I am not remotely the religion-founding type [...] I do not *want* any 'true believers' [...] I have a real fear that someday people will consider me *holy*: you will guess why I am publishing this book *beforehand*; it is supposed to stop any nonsense as far as I am concerned" (EH Destiny 1). These remarks make it clear that Nietzsche is "not setting up any new idols" (EH Preface 2).

That *Zarathustra* is a counter-ideal to the ascetic is mentioned in one other passage and work: the second essay of the *Genealogy*, in the final sections leading up to the third essay. There Nietzsche asserts that *Zarathustra* is the "human of the future who will redeem us from the previous ideal as much as from [...] the will to nothingness"—adding that this requires the *destruction* of the previous ideal (GM II 24). Thus, Nietzsche's aims are critical and suggest that *Zarathustra* plays a pivotal role in accomplishing these aims.

In both of these instances, there are significant similarities to the two equipollent "interpretations" in BGE 22. Once again, Nietzsche provides an alternative to a dogmatic position by employing a counterfactual. Like his appeal to the possibility of rival "power claims" to the scientists' interpretation in BGE 22, both the coming of Zarathustra and the new goal of the superman would rival the dogmatic interpretations of the ascetic ideal. Furthermore, we should note that in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche refers to Zarathustra as a skeptic (A 54). These examples suggest that *Zarathustra*'s role is to be a counter-ideal, opposing the system of

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Loeb (2010: 236).

interpretation provided by the ascetic ideal. Thus, counteracting the ascetic ideal's dogmatic scheme of interpretation employs the skeptical *art of interpretation* that I have focused on here. Moreover, reading *Zarathustra* as part of an equipollent argument overcomes the problem that affects the standard view, on which Nietzsche endorses some dogmatic ideal and, moreover, squares with his remarks in *Ecce Homo* that deter us from appropriating his works for prescriptive ends.

Furthermore, the discussion of *Zarathustra* at the end of the *Genealogy*'s second essay provides a clear transition to the third essay, and the end of the third essay leads to the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. These transitions show that the *Zarathustra* epigraph is part of the *Genealogy*'s thoughtful composition—a movement that Nietzsche describes as a crescendo into a terrible truth (EH “Genealogy”). After discussing *Zarathustra*'s redemptive role, Nietzsche concludes in closing the second essay that it is necessary for him “to be silent” so as to not speak of what is rightfully *Zarathustra*'s to say (GM II 25). Nietzsche's silence gives way immediately to the speech of *Zarathustra* in the epigraph before the third essay:

Carefree, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants *us*: she is a woman, she loves only a warrior. (GM III Epigraph)<sup>17</sup>

We are now in a position to answer our original question: How is the third essay a commentary on this fragment from *Zarathustra*?

I begin with a brief overview of the epigraph in its context in *Zarathustra*, and follow this with how the images of woman, wisdom, and warrior relate to Nietzsche's overall aims in the

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<sup>17</sup> We should note as well that Nietzsche alters the epigraph from *Zarathustra* as it appears before the third essay. The word “*Muthig*,” or “brave,” is omitted and the pronoun “*uns*,” or “us,” is typeset in *Sperrdruck*. What we are to make of this alteration is not entirely clear. Perhaps Nietzsche omitted “*Muthig*” in order for the epigraph to conform to the rhetorical “Rule of Three.” Nietzsche's emphasis on “*uns*,” or “us,” perhaps signals the inclusion of his readership in the interpretation and commentary of the subsequent third essay.

third essay. The latter task will make clear why Nietzsche chooses this particular fragment from *Zarathustra*. As I mentioned in section II, previous attempts by Danto (1986) and Nehamas (1985) to connect these images to the content of the third essay were unsuccessful. Both took Nietzsche's art of interpretation, just as Janaway does, to be a straightforward exegetical task—that is to say, their understanding of the art of interpretation involved simply connecting the images of the epigraph and explaining how they were expanded upon in the third essay. In contrast, the understanding of the art of interpretation that I have laid out in the previous sections allows us to see how these images fit within Nietzsche's overall aim in the third essay of providing a counter-ideal to the ascetic ideal.

In the preface Nietzsche assumes our familiarity with his prior works and directly mentions *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (GM P 8). Thus, he does not expect us to take the epigraph in abstraction from its context in *Zarathustra*, and considering this context furthers our understanding of its relation to the third essay. In fact, Nietzsche's references to his prior works leading up to his discussion of the "art of interpretation" in the *Genealogy's* preface is a signal to his readers that practicing such an art requires an examination of his corpus as a whole. Thus, in addition to demanding an ephectic and skeptical disposition from his readers, Nietzsche's art of interpretation involves, as Joel Westerdale has put it, "cross-textual awareness."<sup>18</sup>

With this contextual emphasis in mind, it is important to note that the epigraph is, of course, taken from the section in *Zarathustra* entitled "On Reading and Writing." Although *Zarathustra* is not generally described as one of Nietzsche's "aphoristic" works (it is a prose poem), Nietzsche's discussion here is noticeably aphoristic in style. For example, he begins:

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<sup>18</sup> Westerdale (2013: 109).

Of all that is written, I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit.

Like the excerpt placed before the *Genealogy*'s third essay, Nietzsche begins with an assertion that is aphoristic in an orthodox sense, and many of the subsequent statements follow this form.

In addition to the section's aphoristic style, several themes within it echo Nietzsche's discussion of the ascetic ideal in the *Genealogy*'s third essay and his remarks in the preface on the interpretation of aphorisms. The first lines concern the intelligibility of writing. He asserts that the democratization of reading and writing has been to the detriment of both, and repeats his sentiment that the art of interpretation has been subsequently unlearned: "That everyone may learn to read, in the long run corrupts not only writing but also thinking. Once the spirit was God, then he became man, and now he even becomes rabble" (Z "On Reading and Writing").

Nietzsche then addresses the nature of aphorisms and the kind of readers suited for them.<sup>19</sup> First, aphorisms are not simply read but "learned by heart." Second, as "peaks" separated by long distances, they are addressed only to those "tall and lofty" enough to move courageously from one peak to the next. The readers described are apt interpreters of the aphoristic form, and welcome the difficult realities they confront. These readers find joy and laughter in the face of seriousness and the difficulties of life. They embody the attitude of the warrior [*Kriegsmann*], "carefree, mocking, violent."

When we consider Nietzsche's agonistic aims, alluded to in GM II 24 as the destruction of the ascetic ideal, as well as the *Genealogy*'s general aim signaled in the subtitle as a polemic [*eine Streitschrift*], the third essay's relation to the content of the epigraph becomes clearer. That

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche uses the German "*Sprüche*" here, perhaps better translated in English as "proverbs" or "maxims," rather than "*Aphorismen*." The reason for this difference in terms might be best explained when we consider that Nietzsche wrote *Zarathustra* as a biblical parody. Thus, the term "*Sprüche*," employed in the German title of the Book of Proverbs [*Buch der Sprüche Salomons*], should signal its use in the context of *Zarathustra* as the parodic equivalent to aphorism.

he is engaged in an agonistic struggle with the ascetic ideal is further clarified in *Ecce Homo* when he summarizes his practice of war [*Kriegs-Praxis*]:<sup>20</sup>

- (1) Attack only those who are victorious.
- (2) Attack an enemy only when you are alone and without any allies.
- (3) Attack *ad hominem* only for the sake of illuminating a more general problem.
- (4) “[Attack] things where there is no question of personal differences, where there has not been a history of bad experiences.” (EH “Wise” 7)

These criteria map clearly onto the content of the third essay. The ascetic ideal, having no competitor, certainly fits criterion (1). Regarding (2), through the course of the third essay Nietzsche identifies artists, philosophers, priests, scientists, and atheists as subservient to the ascetic ideal. Moreover, at the time of writing the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche’s rhetoric of “untimeliness” and failed search for other “free spirits” reaches a crescendo. In both of these respects, he feels himself alienated from any close ally. (3) is performed, for instance, in his attacks on Wagner and Schopenhauer in order to identify the general problem of ascetic ideals for artists and philosophers respectively. We should add this *ad hominem* orientation is part and parcel of the practice of the Pyrrhonian skeptic. The skeptic directs arguments at individual dogmatists with the “philanthropic” aim of curing the dogmatist’s rashness (PH III 280). That is to say, the skeptic is not concerned chiefly with the arguments themselves, but rather the beliefs and health of those with whom they engage. Like Nietzsche’s *ad hominem* attacks on Wagner and Schopenhauer, the skeptic makes a more a general point about health and the pernicious effects of dogmatic belief. Nietzsche’s “philanthropic” disposition, like that of the Pyrrhonian skeptic, is apparent in (4), and corroborated by the following remark: “I have the right to wage war on Christianity because I have never been put out or harmed by it” (EH “Wise” 7).

Furthermore, Nietzsche’s practice of war falls under his account of “why he is so wise” in *Ecce*

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the role of the *agon* in Nietzsche’s corpus, see Acampora (2003).

*Homo*. This point makes clear how his warrior-like disposition is related to the “wisdom” of the *Zarathustra* epigraph.

But what are we to make of Nietzsche’s assertion that wisdom is a woman? Both the German “*Weisheit*” and Greek “*sophiā*” are, of course, feminine nouns, and Nietzsche is perhaps playing on this relationship. But a stronger connection for us to draw here is that wisdom is associated in Greek mythology with Pallas Athena. In connection with the image of the warrior that Nietzsche invokes, we should note as well that the epithet “Pallas” is thought to be derived from the Greek “*pálla*” which means “to brandish [as a weapon].” Moreover, the Greek “*palé*” meaning conflict or contest is also derived from “*pálla*.” Again, these etymological points should not only strengthen the connection both between wisdom and woman, but also their relation to this warrior-like attitude.

Furthermore, the assertion in the *Zarathustra* epigraph that wisdom is a woman is similar to the opening line in Nietzsche’s preface to *Beyond Good & Evil*, asking his readers to “Suppose that truth is a woman” (BGE Preface). There Nietzsche is concerned with philosophical dogmatism, and asserts that not only have dogmatic philosophers misunderstood truth as a woman, but that in return “she has spurned them” (*ibid.*). In this sense, the philosophical dogmatist’s love of truth has been unrequited—“leaving dogmatism of all types sad and discouraged.” In the *Zarathustra* epigraph Nietzsche poses a similar scenario. However, instead of the dogmatic philosopher’s unrequited relationship with truth, he cites the conditions on which the philosopher, a lover of wisdom, is loved by wisdom in return—“carefree, mocking, violent” and having a warrior-like disposition.

Nietzsche’s criticism of the dogmatic philosopher’s concern for truth should remind us of his characterization of the adherents to the ascetic ideal in the third essay—namely, that they too

hold the value of truth to be unconditional (GM III 24). In a later section in *Beyond Good & Evil*, Nietzsche claims that the philosopher has been mistaken for these various kinds of dogmatists.

He writes,

In fact, the masses have misjudged and mistaken the philosopher for a long time, sometimes confusing him with the scientific man and ideal scholar, and sometimes with the religiously elevated, desensitized, desecularized enthusiasts and intoxicated men of God. (BGE 205)

Again, Nietzsche lists those same adherents to the ascetic ideal that he criticizes in the third essay—the scientific man, scholars, and priests. He adds,

To the rabble, wisdom [*Weisheit*] seems like a kind of escape, a device or trick for pulling yourself out of the game when things get rough. But the real philosopher (and isn't this how it seems to *us* [*uns*], my friends?) lives “unphilosophically,” “unwisely,” in a manner which is above all *not clever*, and feels the weight and duty of a hundred experiments and temptations of life:—he constantly puts *himself* at risk, he plays *the* rough game.... (BGE 205)

Contrary to the dogmatist who, as Nietzsche states in the *Genealogy*, employs truth as an “anesthetic” to mitigate the pangs of uncertainty (GM III 20), the “real philosopher” of BGE 205 finds no such solace. While the dogmatist, having found the “truth,” need no longer participate in the inquiry for it, and in effect takes himself “out of the game,” the real philosopher continues on in the inquiry and “plays *the* rough game.”

We should note as well that in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche states that *Beyond Good & Evil* gives the “indications of an opposing type [*Gegensatz-Typus*]” (EH “Beyond Good & Evil” 2). This assertion should make possible that within this work Nietzsche is indicating a counter-ideal to the ascetic. Thus, taking into consideration Nietzsche’s remarks in the third essay of the *Genealogy*, as well as the content of the *Zarathustra* epigraph, this passage not only intimates the kind of wisdom that is opposed to the ascetic ideal, but also that this wisdom involves the very warrior-like attitude mentioned in the epigraph. Furthermore, given Nietzsche’s attack on

dogmatism in *Beyond Good & Evil*, the wisdom so described should be understood as being of a skeptical bent.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The “standard view” had not sufficiently accounted either for the role of the *Zarathustra* epigraph or for Nietzsche’s call for a revival of the art of interpretation. Responding to these deficiencies, I have argued that that the epigraph is the aphorism mentioned in the *Genealogy*’s preface and that there is a clear relation between the themes of the *Zarathustra* epigraph and the *Genealogy*’s third essay. That Nietzsche’s “art of interpretation” involves him in the skeptical practice of constructing equipollent arguments clarifies how *Zarathustra* functions as a counter-ideal to the ascetic ideal analyzed in the third essay. By considering the third essay as an attack on the ascetic ideal and *Zarathustra*’s function within an argumentative strategy that has equipollence as its result, I have shown how the third essay is a commentary on the *Zarathustra* epigraph. Nietzsche’s “practice of war [*Kriegs-Praxis*]” against Christianity, faith, and dogmatism further clarifies how the content of the epigraph is exemplified in the third essay. Lastly, a comparison between Nietzsche’s critical aims and the tactics of the Pyrrhonian skeptic proved integral in solving the riddle of the aphorism and furthermore reiterated his remarks that understanding his work requires a similar, *ephectic* disposition.

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