

## GENEALOGY BEYOND DEBUNKING

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**Abstract:** Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM) is often interpreted as providing a debunking argument of some kind. I consider different versions of such arguments and suggest that they face important challenges. Moving beyond debunking interpretations of GM, I consider Nietzsche's claim that his genealogy should be used to assess the "value" of moral values. After explaining how to understand this claim, I consider different ways that history might be used to assess the value of beliefs, practices, and institutions. The upshot is a general account of genealogy beyond debunking.

### 1. Introduction

Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (henceforth GM) is often taken as a paradigmatic example of a "critical genealogy," a type of philosophical project in which the history of our beliefs and practices is marshalled for some critical end. While there are various accounts of what this critical end is, the most common approach is to interpret Nietzsche as providing some sort of so-called "debunking" argument, an argument targeting the *truth* or *justification* of our moral beliefs. This paper considers such interpretations and argues that they face problems. I then provide an alternative framework for understanding the purpose of Nietzsche's genealogy. This framework helps us understand how genealogies can serve critical ends without being debunking.

I will discuss two types of debunking arguments. Following Leiter (2019), one style of debunking argument I dub an “Explanatory Argument,” according to which a genealogy of  $p$  shows that a type of entity is explanatorily dispensable with respect to  $p$ , thereby providing evidence that that type of entity does not exist. The other style of debunking argument I dub an “Off-Track Argument,” according to which a genealogy shows that some belief  $p$  is the product of an “off-track” process, thereby showing that belief in  $p$  is not justified. If we think that knowledge entails true justified belief, then these arguments target different aspects of moral knowledge. Explanatory arguments target the truth of all “positive” moral beliefs, while off-track arguments target the justification of particular moral beliefs.

Despite the appeal of interpreting Nietzsche’s *GM* in one of these ways, I will suggest that neither type of interpretation is compelling. Moreover, the two interpretations are incompatible, as the conclusion of the Explanatory Argument undermines the crucial premise of the Off-Track Argument. This opens the door for considering other modes of critical genealogy.

## **2. Debunking Arguments: Explanatory and Off-Track Arguments**

Nietzsche’s historical claims in *GM* elude easy summary. As Bernard Williams describes Nietzsche’s genealogy in *Truth and Truthfulness*,

It has something to do with history, though it is far from clear what history: there are some vaguely situated masters and slaves; then an

historical change, which has something to do with Jews or Christians; there is a process which culminates perhaps in the Reformation, perhaps in Kant. It has been going on for two thousand years. (37)

For our purposes, we can focus on the most familiar part of Nietzsche's discussion, the so-called "slave revolt" in morality, as this is the aspect of Nietzsche's genealogy that debunking interpretations typically draw on.

In this part of *GM*, Nietzsche aims to explain how egalitarian "slave morality" emerged and came to largely supplant an earlier, more inegalitarian "master morality" and thereby become the dominant strand in our current ethical framework.<sup>1</sup> The explanation has many components, but the core idea is that slave morality was invented by a priestly caste, who inverted the key evaluations of master morality such that the individuals and actions classified as "good" in master morality are classified as "evil" in slave morality. This inversion was motivated by the priests' frustration and *ressentiment* against the masters, feelings that were shared by a wider

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<sup>1</sup> Slave morality is egalitarian by virtue of being structured around the concepts of "good" and "evil," which embed a set of assumptions about equality (GM I.14; BGE 219; TI Expeditions 48), free will (GM I.13), the importance of compassion (GM P.5; A 7), and the priority of moral obligation (BGE 198). Master morality is an inegalitarian by virtue of being structured around the concepts of "good" and "bad," which embed assumptions about the "order of rank" and differences among different types of persons (GM I: 17; HAH I: Preface 7; BGE 265, TI Skirmishes 37).

population of “slaves,” which explains slave morality’s widespread social uptake.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s imagine this story of where our morality came from is true. So what? How should it affect our current moral thinking?

A common answer is that this history gives us reason to doubt the truth or justification of our moral beliefs –it contributes to “debunking” those beliefs. There are two common “debunking” reconstructions of *GM*. One in which Nietzsche’s history supports skepticism about moral properties *generally* (the “Explanatory Argument”). Another is that it plays a role in an argument for skepticism about particular moral claims (the “Off-track Argument”).

### 2.1 Metaphysical Debunking: The Explanatory Argument

A prominent interpretation of *GM* is that it is part of a broader campaign to undermine our belief in the objectivity of moral values (Sinababu 2007; Leiter 2019). This interpretation is typically couched in a

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<sup>2</sup> Slave morality was psychologically appealing to the slaves for two reasons. First, it provided a set of evaluative standards that denigrated physical superiority and the direct exercise of power, which enables the weak to denigrate their social superiors. Second, it gave those who are weaker a sense of agency by reinterpreting their impotence as a principled (moral) choice, thus bringing them up.

broader narrative of letting go of comforting assumptions. Secular people, so the thought goes, have given up on the more vulgar comforts of religious belief—that an ideal retirement community awaits you in the afterlife, that divine justice will eventually smite your enemies, etc.—but they have yet to give up the comforting assumption of the objectivity of moral values, which is a holdover from Christian metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> Now here comes Nietzsche to unsettle these comforting, if dogmatic, slumbers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the assumption that the objectivity of morality rests on God's existence or other theological assumptions may *itself* be a religious assumption. On this way of thinking, it is Nietzsche—or Leiter's Nietzsche—who is in the grip of a religious picture and a truly secular philosophy would let go of this assumption. This point underscores the limited dialectical effectiveness of charges that another philosopher is in the grip of religious assumptions. For that philosopher can always respond that the fact that you think that some philosophical claim *P depends on* religious assumptions *R1...n* is *itself* the true religious assumption. See also Queloz and Cueni (2019, 279) for a related distinction between “stage two” and “stage three” atheists.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche thinks this assumption is comforting for a few different reasons. First, weak people have a need for predictability and order in their environment, and the notion of objective facts helps fulfill this need (BGE 59, GS 5). Second, the belief in objective values provides a kind of *backing* to the slaves' judgments that the masters do not need, and it allows them to

The way Nietzsche upsets these assumptions is by showing that objective moral values do not play the role that they are typically, if implicitly, thought to play in explaining our moral attitudes. Showing that they do not play *this* explanatory role suggests that they play *no* explanatory role, since the explanation of moral beliefs is the most plausible candidate explanatory role for such values. And if such values have *no* explanatory role to play, then why should we believe that there are such things?

Following Sinhababu (2007, pg. 271), and formulated in terms of moral properties, we can reconstruct the reasoning like so:

(F<sub>E</sub>) The hypothesis that moral properties exist is not part of the best explanation of our observations and experiences

(E<sub>E</sub>) If a hypothesis is not part of the best explanation of our observations and experiences, we are not justified in believing it

(C<sub>E</sub>) We are not justified in believing that moral properties exist

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evade responsibility for their judgments (D 108, WP 20). Third, much of the slaves' experience revolve around receiving unconditional commands (BGE 46, 198, 199, 221). For a sophisticated account of why the need for such comforting assumptions constitutes a kind of weakness for Nietzsche, see Reginster 2003.

As the above reconstruction highlights, this reasoning is rooted in a “Quinean” way of thinking, according to which when constructing our ontology, we ought to use the means employed by the sciences in justifying ontological claims – seeing whether positing some entity is required to explain our observations.<sup>5</sup> Forcing our ontology to answer to science is a way of identifying and purging religious assumptions (and other mysterious assumptions) from ostensibly secular philosophical and culture. This interpretation is therefore typically embedded in a broader “naturalistic”

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<sup>5</sup> While the above argument is formulated in an epistemic key, the spirit of the argument is metaphysical. The *reason why* we are not justified in believing that moral properties exist if they are not part of the best explanation of our observations is (typically) the background assumption that playing an explanatory role is a condition of something’s existing at all (moreover, proponents of this argument typically assume the explanatory role has to be a *causal* role). Understood in this way, the explanatory argument starts from a meta-metaphysical premise concerning what conditions an entity must meet in order to count as existing. And then it adds a factual premise about whether moral properties meet the relevant conditions. I will discuss the argument as formulated in the epistemic mode, as none of the points I will make turn on these differences and because that is the mode in which the argument is often discussed in the secondary literature.

interpretation of Nietzsche, according to which Nietzsche is aiming to make philosophy continuous with the sciences (Leiter 2002).<sup>6</sup>

According to this interpretation of *GM*, the role of Nietzsche's history of morality is to support premise  $F_E$ . It does so in two ways. First, it provides an explanation of our moral beliefs that does not appeal to moral properties. Second, it provides an error theory about why we might think that such properties *are* required for the explanation of our moral beliefs – that such a belief is “comforting” (for reasons discussed in ft. 4).

These two ways of supporting  $F_E$  are complementary and mutually supporting. Simply providing an explanation of our moral beliefs that does not appeal to moral properties does not do much to show that such properties play *no* role in the explanation of those beliefs. To do that, the explanation would have to be exhaustive, which of course *GM*'s is not. Moreover, an exclusive focus on the causal explanation of moral beliefs might be thought overly narrow and fail to appreciate explanatory roles for moral properties besides causal ones. For as Amia Srinivasan (2015, 331-2) points out, many philosophers are realists about domains they believe are causally inert. Given that *GM*'s account omits many parts of the web of causal relations leading to contemporary morality and that there may be explanatory relations besides causal ones, morality's defenders may claim

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<sup>6</sup> There are a number of ways in which one might look for “continuity” with the sciences. See Leiter 2002 for discussion.



that among the omitted explanatory factors are moral properties.<sup>7</sup> In response, the Nietzschean can then appeal to the error theory regarding why we are tempted to believe such properties must play *some* explanatory role, along with the observation that it is difficult to identify a compelling argument that they do play any such a role. Together, these considerations lend support to  $F_E$ .

There are a number of reasons to think Nietzsche is making an argument of this sort. First, *GM does* tells a story in which our moral beliefs are explained without appeal to non-naturalistic moral facts, as well as material that could be used to provide the error theory mentioned above. So it provides support for the factual premise  $F_E$ .

Moreover, providing naturalistic explanations of purportedly non-naturalistic phenomena is a recurring interest in Nietzsche's work, as Brian Leiter (2019) has pointed out. For instance, there are passages in which Nietzsche claims that our moral viewpoints are not derived from cognition of moral facts but rather from various non-cognitive affects (BGE 187), or unknown physiological processes (D 119), or drives (BGE 6). This interest is also reflected in Nietzsche's broader theoretical remarks about the causal impotence of moral properties, as when he writes in *TI* that "[t]he entire

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<sup>7</sup> This parallels an issue that arises for explanations of scientific theory change that highlight non-epistemic causal factors. Such explanations do not show, at least at first blush, that epistemic factors are not *also* at work in theory change.

realm of morality and religion belongs to this concept of imaginary cause” (Four Errors 6).<sup>8</sup> So there is reason to think Nietzsche *believed* the factual premise, and reason to think he thought it was a philosophically important.

Second, there is evidence that Nietzsche believes the *conclusion* of the explanatory argument. While there is robust debate about Nietzsche’s meta-ethical (or meta-normative) views, he says things that suggest anti-realism at a number of points. For example, in *TI*, Nietzsche writes that “[j]udgments, value-judgements about life, pro or contra, can in the final analysis never be true; they have value only as symptoms. . . .” (TI ‘The Problem of Socrates’ 52). This sentiment is echoed in *BGE*, for instance, when he writes that “[t]here are absolutely no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena” (BGE 108). More broadly, Nietzsche conceives the task of the philosopher as law-*giver* rather than *discoverer* of normative truths (e.g. BGE 211; Z I:15), and one explanation for why this might be is that he assumes there are no such truths out there to be discovered.

However, there are reasons to be skeptical that this argument is getting at the heart of Nietzsche’s critique of morality in *GM*. First, the

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Nietzsche writes that “it is errors which, as the basis of all moral judgments, impel men to their moral actions. This is my point of view . . . Thus I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises: but I do not deny that there have been alchemists who believed in these premises and acted in accordance with them.” (D 103).

exegetical case faces various challenges. When it comes to the first premise (the factual premise), Nietzsche makes little effort to show that moral properties play *no* role in the explanation of anything we observe or experience. This is something Nietzsche seems to assume rather than try to prove. Of course, in using this assumption, he may be implicitly making an inductive argument for the conclusion that non-natural properties play no such role by showing that purported counterexamples can be explained away. But here, it is less likely that he is trying to establish the factual premise in order to argue for the conclusion than that he is starting from the conclusion to argue for the particular claims that this argument takes to support the factual premise. There are a number of reasons why Nietzsche finds these factual claims to be independently important, such as that they illustrate the “impure” origins of our values (see Queloz and Cueni 2019 for discussion).

More broadly, while Nietzsche is often interested in providing “naturalistic” explanations, providing naturalistic explanations is not the same as denying that there are any non-naturalistic explanations. Moreover, it is not the same as using such a denial in an argument for anti-realism. That would require both endorsing the epistemic premise ( $E_E$ )<sup>9</sup> and *using* that premise in an argument for anti-realism. There is little exegetical

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps BGE 13 could be read as endorsing this premise—there, Nietzsche writes that we should employ a “method, which must essentially be the economy of principles” (BGE 13).

evidence for either of these.<sup>10</sup> Discussions of this argument in the secondary literature (e.g. Leiter 2019, chapter 1) tend to import the crucial bits of argumentative structure, which makes one skeptical of the strength of the exegetical case.

Of course, a philosopher can use Nietzsche's story about the history of morality in the service of such an explanatory argument, just as a philosopher can use a naturalistic explanation of any phenomenon in the service of such an argument. But this does not show that Nietzsche is making such an argument any more than e.g. the fact that a philosopher can use neuroscientific explanations of moral beliefs in such an argument shows that neuroscientists are making such arguments. Moreover, to the degree to which Nietzsche endorses the three claims in the above argument (and drawing inferences among them), it is more plausible that he is *starting* from anti-realism and using that to support his particular causal hypotheses, rather than using those causal hypotheses to support anti-realism.

These exegetical points may sound overly nitpicky, particularly as imposing a bit of argumentative structure might be thought necessary when dealing with a philosopher as unsystematic and allusive as Nietzsche.<sup>11</sup> However, there are deeper reasons that this interpretation does not get to

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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as previously mentioned, whether Nietzsche is an anti-realist is itself contentious (see e.g. Huddleston 2019, chapter 7), and we would not want our interpretation of *GM* to turn on it.

the heart of Nietzsche's concerns—the criticism it suggests is too broad and fails to capture the distinctions that are most important to Nietzsche in *GM*.

First, as alluded to above, this interpretation does not explain much about Nietzsche's *actual* story. Any naturalistic story would do, including, one might think, the story of *GM*'s key opponent, Paul Rée. According to Rée, human beings have two distinct and conflicting drives –the egoistic and non-egoistic drives, the latter much weaker than the former. Morality—which Rée equates with altruistic attitudes and actions associated with the non-egoistic drive—arises when we begin to develop positive associations with the non-egoistic drive because non-egoistic action is praised by others due to its social utility. There are many differences between Nietzsche's and Rées origin stories. However, they are both naturalistic—the dispute is a skirmish *within* naturalism, rather than a skirmish between naturalists and non-naturalists.<sup>12</sup> So, insofar as the difference to Rée is important for

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<sup>11</sup> Interpretive charity might be thought to encourage imposing such structure. However, there are also philosophical objections to this argument of course, so it is not clear how charitable such an interpretation is. Most notably, one might think that there are ways to come to justified belief that there are non-natural moral properties besides those properties being indispensable for *explanation*. For instance, David Enoch (2011, chapter 3) has argued that we are entitled to believe in non-natural normative truths because such truths are indispensable for *deliberation*.

Nietzsche's critique of morality, it would be surprising if *naturalism* were the thing doing the critical work.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the criticism that such an interpretation implies of our evaluative attitudes would seem to apply equally well to both master and slave morality. For, plausibly, the masters also believe their values are objective. They think they *really are* superior to the slaves, not just that this is their opinion. So this interpretation fails to explain why and how Nietzsche's primary critical target is slave morality. Moreover, even if one were to hold that Nietzsche thought that master and slave morality differed in this respect, this difference is not the grounds for Nietzsche's difference in evaluation between the two—Nietzsche's problem with slave morality isn't that the slaves are in an epistemically worse position than the masters. So this interpretation suggests the wrong kind of reason for rating master morality above slave morality.

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Rée (2003) writes that “[m]oral phenomena can be traced back to natural causes just as much as physical phenomena: moral man stands no closer to the intelligible world than physical man” (97). Moreover, many of Nietzsche's other intellectual opponents, such as Herbert Spencer, were also naturalists in the relevant sense (see Dunkle 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are differences between these explanations that might make a difference—such as that Rée's story potentially vindicates morality, at least from the view of contemporary opinion or by its own lights (more on this later). However, this is not a metaphysical difference.

Now, it is plausible that Nietzsche thinks that even though the masters, as a matter of fact, believe that their values – and their lives – are objectively superior to those of slaves, they are not psychologically *reliant* on this assumption in the way the slaves are. The exact psychological roles that the assumption of moral objectivity plays for the slaves, and the reason that assumptions provides some kind of consolation and comfort (and what this says about the slaves' character), are some of the most fascinating questions that Nietzsche's texts raise and investigate.<sup>14</sup> However, no matter the exact answer to these questions, the objection that Nietzsche has to these roles is not that they yield or involve false belief (e.g. BGE 4). It is, as I will discuss later, that they express bad traits of character and have pernicious effects.

Of course, the fact that the Explanatory argument does not draw certain important distinctions does not by itself show that we should not interpret Nietzsche as making the argument. Not every argument Nietzsche makes need be directed at e.g. showing that slave morality is worse than master morality. However, these considerations do illustrate the way in which the Explanatory interpretation fixates on something that might seem secondary from the perspective of *GM* and, combined with the exegetical issues mentioned earlier, this should make us suspicious that Nietzsche is making such an argument.

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 4.

## 2.2 Epistemic Debunking: The “Off-Track” Argument

A second debunking interpretation of *GM* holds that Nietzsche’s history aims to undermine the beliefs associated with slave morality by showing them to be the products of unreliable processes, e.g. the motivated reasoning of vengeful clergy (Sinhababu 2007). On this view, Nietzsche targets not skepticism about moral properties *generally* but rather skepticism about more particular moral beliefs, those associated with slave morality.

The most straightforward way of understanding such an argument is to reconstruct it as appealing to a reliabilist theory of justification. Following Kahane (2011), the rough form of this argument is:

(F<sub>0</sub>) Our moral beliefs are the product of an unreliable “off- track” process

(E<sub>0</sub>) Beliefs are not justified if they are the product of an unreliable “off- track” process

Therefore, (C<sub>0</sub>) our moral beliefs are not justified

We could, of course, give more detail regarding what it is for a process to be “off track.” For instance, is what matters the ratio of true to false beliefs a process tends to produce (Goldman 1979, 1986), some modal condition such as that it yields false beliefs in “normal” worlds (Leplin 2007, 2009), or something else? These details will not matter for our purposes.



One disadvantage of formulating the argument in this reliabilist way is that it seems to presuppose ethical objectivism (see Kahane 2007). For what makes processes of moral belief formation “off-track” from the epistemic point of view is that they do not track moral truths. However, the claim that these processes—in comparison to other processes—do not track moral truths presupposes that there are moral truths to track. So, on this formulation, the Off-Track argument requires that the Explanatory Argument fail. Rather than being complementary, as certain interpreters like Sinhababu (2007) suggest, the arguments are in tension. Moreover, this points to exegetical problems. For all the textual evidence mentioned earlier that Nietzsche denies meta-ethical objectivism can be marshalled to show that Nietzsche cannot coherently be making an Off-Track Argument.

Let me say more about this concern. Of course, if we assume moral nihilism, then there is a trivial sense in which the belief-formation processes in *GM* are not truth-tracking, since there are *no* processes that track such truths. However, this would provide little comfort to the Nietzschean debunker because the argument would then not turn on any of the particular historical claims that Nietzsche makes.<sup>15</sup> If we ascribe some kind of mind-dependent meta-ethics to Nietzsche, it then however becomes less

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<sup>15</sup> To address this concern, we might individuate the relevant processes in a more coarse-grained way, as reliabilists often do to avoid problems like this. However, if we do this, it then becomes more difficult to show that the processes Nietzsche describes are off-track.

clear if the processes that Nietzsche describes are truly “off-track.” If the truth of slave morality—for the slaves—is grounded in the slaves’ attitudes and motivations, then it seems that acquiring those beliefs from clergy with similar attitudes and motivations would be acquiring them via a truth-tracking process.<sup>16</sup> The basic problem is that it is difficult to secure a reliabilist interpretation of this argument according to which (i) the argument is sound, (ii) objectivism is false, and (iii) Nietzsche’s genealogy is needed to support the factual premise  $F_0$ .

A more promising reconstruction appeals to an internalist variant of this argument according to which our beliefs are unjustified if we *justifiably believe* that they are the product of an unreliable process, whether or not they *are* the result of such a process. For instance, consider Peter Kail’s (2011) view that the purpose of Nietzsche’s genealogical story is to “destabilize” our current beliefs. Kail claims that “[a] destabilizing account

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<sup>16</sup> One might avoid this problem by adopting a very particular type of mind dependent view, for instance one according to which Nietzsche holds that value is grounded in the attitudes of higher types (Silk 2015). However, such an interpretation is exegetically contentious. Moreover, even if it were exegetically sound, the argument would then rely on an idiosyncratic Nietzschean doctrine that is likely to repel contemporary readers, which is a problem for those interpreters who would like to use Nietzsche’s thought to question contemporary moral assumptions (e.g. Leiter 2019).

involves an awareness of causes of the belief that motivates a requirement to provide further justification for that belief” (228).

There are a few ways in which Kail’s claim can be read. On one way of understanding Kail, destabilization is like what Roger White (2011) has called “prompting reassessment.” Sometimes the explanation of our beliefs suggests we have come to them without really thinking, or for bad reasons, which prompts us to begin inquiry into whether they are correct.<sup>17</sup> For instance, I might realize that I believe that classical music is aesthetically valuable just because that is a common assumption in my social milieu, which might prompt me to consider whether such music really is so valuable. If I am to rationally maintain my belief, I will need to seek further grounds for it.

Explanatory information can prompt reassessment without indicating that a belief is false. In fact, as White (2011) points out, it can prompt reassessment even if that information does not itself have any epistemic significance.<sup>18</sup> Say that in realizing why I think classical music is artistically valuable, I realize I haven’t really thought about the issue, so I need to

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche sometimes seems to be concerned with cases like this: “The fettered spirit (der gebundene Geist) takes up his position, not for reasons, but out of habit. He is a Christian, for example, not because he has knowledge of the various religions and has chosen between them [...]: he encountered Christianity [...] and adopted [it] without reasons, as a man born in wine-producing country becomes a wine-drinker.” (HAH, I 226)

reassess. This does not show that the historical information has epistemic significance, as many things may bring about a similar realization. For instance, a friend may ask me why I'm so sure that classical music is valuable, thereby prompting me to realize I have no such good grounds. Such a question may prompt reassessment, but, of course, it is not itself evidence that rebuts or undercuts my beliefs. Moreover, imagine that in the process of my reassessment, I learn that the explanation for how I came to these judgements is actually different from what I suspected—for instance, I am a non-conformist and did not get these beliefs from my milieu but from somewhere else. This new explanatory information would not restore my confidence in my previous beliefs in the way that say, the removal of evidence that rebuts or undercuts my beliefs would. This suggests that the explanation *in itself* is neither here nor there epistemically.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It might seem counterintuitive that in such cases the historical information has no epistemic significance. White (2011) provides an error theory to explain this intuition. He notes that we often come to believe such explanations by noticing differences between our milieu and other milieus, and this information about disagreement might be epistemically relevant. So, he suspects, we typically mistake the epistemic relevance of disagreement for the epistemic relevance of the causes of our beliefs.

<sup>19</sup> One might think that information about the causes of our beliefs must have *some* epistemic significance if it is to prompt reassessment – for it makes me revise my previous view that I have *some* other (first-order)

However, Kail presumably thinks that “destabilization” is an epistemic, not merely causal, phenomenon—Nietzsche’s history of morality in some way rebuts or undercuts our moral beliefs. Several parts of Nietzsche’s story plausibly play one of these roles. First, the chain of events that ultimately produced our basic moral beliefs traces back to an unreliable source: vengeful clergy. To the degree to which the sources of evidence for our beliefs—such as the testimony of our parents, church, or social milieu—rely on these clergy, Nietzsche’s story undercuts those sources of evidence.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to the degree to which such clergy are not just unreliable but *anti*-reliable, it might be even evidence that our basic moral beliefs are systematically false. Second, the *ressentiment* characteristic of the slave revolt may still be part of our moral psychology, which suggests that our current reasoning about moral matters may be

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reasons for my belief that classical music is aesthetically valuable, even if I was not able to articulate them. However, this is to mistake the epistemic significance of the reflection that indicates that one has no grounds for one’s beliefs with the epistemic significance of the cause of that reflection.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, we do not typically acquire our moral beliefs directly from clergy. We rather acquire them from our parents and culture, who acquired them from *their* parents and culture, and so on back to the vengeful priests’ revaluation (see D 34-5).

distorted. Awareness of such influences undercuts our use of moral reasoning as evidence for the truth of our moral beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

There are several reasons to believe Nietzsche is making *some* argument of this kind (however it is to be construed). First, there is the obvious fact that the process Nietzsche posits as explaining our current moral attitudes seems, intuitively, off-track. Vengeful clergy do not seem like a reliable source of moral insight, and *ressentiment* is something that can easily distort one's reasoning. Second, Nietzsche often expresses contempt for forms of "biased" or motivated reasoning (e.g., HAH 1 227; A27) and approval of facing hard truths (BGE 120). This suggests he cares about the ways our reasoning can be unconsciously distorted, as well as about doxastic justification. Third, and more speculatively, Nietzsche is interested in cross-cultural differences in morality (BGE 186) in addition to the history of current Christian morality.<sup>22</sup> As Roger White (2011) has pointed out, there are important connections between the epistemic significance of disagreement and that of "off-track" or irrelevant causal influences. Cross-cultural disagreement is often a crucial piece of evidence that beliefs are sensitive to off-track influences. So Nietzsche's concern with

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<sup>21</sup> This is analogous to learning that you have taken a drug that distorts your reasoning (for discussion of such cases, see Christensen 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Brian Leiter (2019) has argued that Nietzsche develops a particular kind of argument from disagreement for *anti-realism*. Here, we are considering the connection between disagreement and off-track arguments.

disagreement might also suggest he is concerned with off-track causal influences.

Fourth, unlike the Explanatory Argument, this off-track interpretation of debunking draws an important contrast between Paul Rée's story about the origin of morality and Nietzsche's own. By Rée's lights, as well as those of conventional morality, the process that Rée posits to explain the emergence of morality seems on-track. Relying on others' positive assessments of altruistic action is a reliable process of coming to believe that such actions are good, assuming that what makes the actions good are the broad social benefits that they provide. At the very least, the account is not self-undermining in that the process by which we come to our moral views can be judged on-track by the standards of those views. Nietzsche's story is, of course, different. This difference may partly explain why Nietzsche's critical project requires contesting Rée's story.

However, interpreting Nietzsche as providing an Off-Track Argument of this kind faces multiple challenges. First, as in the case of the Explanatory Argument, there is little reason to think that Nietzsche held either the factual premise or the relevant normative epistemic premise. In fact, some interpreters (e.g. Leiter 2019) have held that Nietzsche was an epistemic anti-realist. If this were the case, then this argument would not even get off the ground.

Second, again mirroring problems with the Explanatory Argument interpretation, this debunking interpretation does not capture the distinctions that are most important to Nietzsche in *GM*. Nietzsche's critique is primarily directed at slave morality rather than master morality. However, the Off-Track argument is indiscriminate—it would apply equally well to both—because the master's normative beliefs are also formed by an unreliable process. As Nietzsche writes of master morality, “[e]verything it knows as part of itself it honors: such a morality is self-glorification. In the foreground there is the feeling of fullness, of power that seeks to overflow” (260). This looks like paradigmatically biased wishful thinking—a normative view is adopted without reflection because it is self-valorizing. So to the degree to which there is some kind of comparative criticism being exercised here, it does not seem that unreliability is at issue.

A useful point of contrast is with the use of off-track arguments in normative ethics. For instance, consequentialists often aim to vindicate their view against purported counterexamples by showing that deontological intuitions issue from an unreliable source, such as our Christian heritage, whereas consequentialist intuitions do not. Take Singer's claim that we shouldn't be worried about revisionary conclusions from his utilitarianism for “[o]n abortion, suicide, and voluntary euthanasia . . . we may think as we do because we have grown up in a society that was, for two thousand years, dominated by the Christian religion” (Singer, 2005,



345). Here, off-track arguments are used selectively, to resolve conflicts among competing aspects of our current moral framework.

There is no parallel in the case of *GM*. For even though Nietzsche thinks that there is something more concerning about slave morality than master morality, that thing is not the unreliability of the process of belief formation.

Third, even this more internalist reconstruction of the reliability argument faces challenges if we assume that (i) the truth of the key reliability premise depends on meta-ethical objectivism and (ii) Nietzsche thought objectivism is false. That there is a problem here may not be obvious because, unlike the reliabilist construal of the Off-Track argument, on the suggested internalist view, the destabilization of the slaves' moral beliefs does not depend on their process of moral belief being unreliable. So the argument does not depend on a view Nietzsche rejected. However, it does depend on Nietzsche holding that those whose views are being debunked *justifiably believe* a view he rejected—for how else would the slaves be justified in believing that the process is unreliable, except by also justifiably believing that objectivism is correct? If this is right, it creates a problem. For it is difficult to see, by Nietzsche's lights, how the slaves could be justified in making such an assumption. Moreover, even if they *were* justified in making this assumption, they would presumably lose this justification were they to appreciate the force of the Explanatory Argument.

So, again, it seems that the two arguments are in tension rather than mutually supporting.<sup>23</sup>

Stepping back, I believe the root of the problems with the Off-Track interpretation parallels a problem with the Explanatory Argument—the argument fails to appreciate ways in which Nietzsche’s views about truth and well-founded belief differ from the assumptions made by most mainstream analytic epistemologists. As is well-known, Nietzsche has a complex relationship to the values of truth, well-founded belief, and good inference. On one hand, Nietzsche excoriates slave morality as being in the grip of various delusions, based on “lies,” and the product of rationalization (e.g. GM I.14). However, the reasons Nietzsche cares about truth and justification are not the reasons that most contemporary epistemologists do. Unlike most contemporary epistemologists, Nietzsche is not concerned

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, one could interpret the internalist argument differently – as only requiring *belief* (rather than justified belief) that the process is unreliable. Perhaps this is the only assumption one needs to make in order for the argument to be dialectically effective against those who hold objectivism. However, if the argument is formulated this way, it does not secure the debunking conclusion. If you are not *justified* in believing that the process is unreliable, then rather than rejecting the claim that our moral beliefs are justified, it would be equally rational to reject the claim that the process is comparatively unreliable.

about the truth and well-fondness of our beliefs for their own sake,<sup>24</sup> nor is he confident that true and well-founded belief is typically instrumentally valuable.<sup>25</sup> Rather, he is concerned with how certain kinds of false beliefs and bad inferences express particular deficiencies of character, e.g. “fanaticism” or being a “fettered” spirit (see Reginster 2003), and with the psychological and social functions of such beliefs and forms of reasoning.

Crucially, it is not false belief or bad inference or other epistemic vices *as such* that are expressive of the kinds of bad character that concerns Nietzsche. The masters may have false beliefs about their objective superiority based on an unreliable process of belief formation, but this may be expressive of a healthy, self-affirming character. The fervent pursuit of truth, a typical epistemic virtue, can be a kind of weakness for Nietzsche

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, he writes in *BGE* that “the falseness of a judgment is not necessarily an objection to a judgment . . . The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (4). Of Christian morality, Nietzsche writes that “it is not error as error that horrifies me at this sight” (EH 332).

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche delights in pointing out cases in which false beliefs have good effects (REF). Moreover, unlike most contemporary epistemologists, Nietzsche does not necessarily think that providing rational support for one’s intuitions will make them more robust. For instance, in *CW*, he writes that “[a]n instinct becomes weaker if it rationalizes itself” (*CW*, postscript pg. 255).

(GS 347).<sup>26</sup> The character distinctions that matter to Nietzsche often have an epistemic aspect, but they do not map onto more typical ways of distinguishing good from bad epistemic agency.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, when it comes to the psychological and social functions of belief, Nietzsche is not concerned with true or well-founded belief as such but rather with questions like why certain kinds of rationalizations and false beliefs might constrain the spirit (Reginster 2013), whereas other kinds might be liberating, self-affirming, or life-preserving (GS 344; HAH Preface 1; see Gemes 2019). Epistemic evaluations as such are not the primary concern. Moreover, whether a particular belief or rationalization has these good or bad features may depend on the type of person at issue,<sup>28</sup> whereas

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<sup>26</sup> “No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to “truth at any price,” this youthful madness in the of truth-have lost their charm for us” (GS Preface to the Second Edition). Similarly, in seeking the truth, “[o]ne positively wants to repudiate one’s own authority and assign it to circumstances” (WTP 422). As Gemes (1992) argues, the pursuit of truth can, for Nietzsche, be a means of repudiating one’s own responsibility by trying to delegate belief or action to a higher authority.

<sup>27</sup> For example, the “free spirit” is not just a good epistemic agent, or even an autonomous one (see Reginster 2003).

<sup>28</sup> “What serves the higher type of man as nourishment or delectation must also be the poison for a very different and inferior type. The virtues of the common man might signify vices and weaknesses in a philosopher” (BGE

contemporary epistemology is looking for more person-invariant norms. It is for these reasons that the typical forms of critical argument discussed in mainstream epistemology only imperfectly fit Nietzsche's texts.

### **3. Genealogical Critique Beyond Debunking**

There is a lot more we could discuss about these arguments. However, beside the various objections I've raised to them, as readings of Nietzsche they are limited for a big-picture reason. In viewing Nietzsche through the lens of contemporary analytic epistemology, they neglect the primary purpose of Nietzsche's genealogical critique. Nietzsche says in the beginning of the genealogy that his purpose is to assess "the value of values" (GM P.6). But neither of these arguments *do* that. They concern the *truth* or *justification* of our value beliefs, not the *value* of those beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, to understand this contrast, we need to say more about what Nietzsche means by the "value of values." This formulation might seem odd. Aren't values, by their nature, *valuable*? We might therefore think that to challenge the value of a value is just to challenge its truth.

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<sup>29</sup> As I discuss later, I do not deny that assessing the value of values and providing a debunking argument are compatible, nor do I deny that scholars who ascribe such arguments to Nietzsche fail to recognize that Nietzsche aims to assess the value of our values. Here, I simply note that these interpretations focus on something that is, on its face, not Nietzsche's central concern in *GM*.

However, this is not how Nietzsche is thinking of things (GS 345; BGE 4). We need to distinguish two senses of “values.” First, there are Nietzsche’s views about our “positive values,” those values that *characterize* existing attitudes, practices, and social institutions. These are Nietzsche’s objects of evaluation when he speaks of the value of *values*. For instance, when interpreters dispute whether Nietzsche thinks contemporary morality is characterized by slave morality or rather by a mix of slave and master morality (plus other things), this is a dispute about the nature of our positive values.

Second, there are what I will call Nietzsche’s “critical values,” the values that *Nietzsche* is using to *assess* the positive values embodied in present attitudes, practices, and social institutions. There is much discussion in the secondary literature about the content and status of these values. For instance, how are we to understand Nietzsche’s key evaluative concepts like “health” (Dunkel 2022), “life” (Stern 2019), “power” (Katsafanas 2011, 2013), as well as his claims about the importance of great individuals and flourishing cultures (Huddleston 2019)? How do these values hang together, if at all, and is it possible to ascribe a normative theory to him (e.g. Hurka 2007)? These are questions about the content of these critical values.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> There is also much discussion about the status and authority of these values. Does Nietzsche think these values are, in some sense, objectively correct or “privileged” (Huddleston 2019; Leiter 2019)? If they are

When we think of Nietzsche's genealogy, we need to think about how the *historical* information about our *positive* values be relevant to their assessment according to Nietzsche's *critical* values. How this works is actually more puzzling than it might appear, and I'll spend the rest of the paper discussing what the puzzle is and how it might be addressed. This will help us see some other potential uses for genealogy.

### 3.1 The Puzzle About Nietzsche's Genealogical Critique

The puzzle is this: on the one hand, Nietzsche's *critical values* all seem to appeal to *what morality is like now*. As mentioned above, there is a lot of debate about the content of Nietzsche's values. However, all the candidates seem to be "presentist" or "futurist" in that the features that matter are those the present character or future effects of the object of evaluation.

(1) *Anti-historicism about Critical Values*: Morality's value is grounded in present properties and future effects, not its historical properties

However, this anti-historicism about critical values is often thought to be matched with a *historicism* about positive values. According to Nietzsche, our positive values are protean and ever-changing. You shouldn't think that \_\_\_\_\_ privileged, in what way, and is it even possible to ascribe a meta-normative theory to Nietzsche?

what our values are like now was that they were like in the past. Our morality has no transhistorical essence. Recognizing this is what Nietzsche calls having a “historical sense” something that Nietzsche chides other philosophers for lacking (e.g. HAH 2; TI III.1).

(2) *Historicism about Positive Values* The important and defining features of morality have changed over time

However, these two claims sit uneasily together. Roughly, the concern is that if morality’s important or defining features have changed over time, then the features revealed by historical investigation are poor evidence for its current important and defining features. But if history is such a poor indicator for the present, and what matters to our assessment of morality is the present, then what use is looking at this deeper history?<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche himself seems sensitive to this puzzle. For instance, he writes that “*formerly*, when investigators of knowledge sought out the origins of things they always believed they would discover something of incalculable significance for all later action and judgement, that they always *presupposed*, indeed, that the *salvation* of man must depend on *insight into the origin of things*: but that now, on the contrary, the more we advance towards origins, the more our interest diminishes; indeed, that all the evaluations and ‘interestness’ we have implanted things begin to lose their meaning the further we go back and the closer we approach the things themselves. *The more insight we possess into an origin the less significant*



It is like if you are making a hiring decision, where all that matters for evaluating the candidates is their current and future skills. If you think that candidates' past skills are not good predictors of their present and future skills, then trying to figure out which candidates were incompetent back in the day is a waste of time. This is so for two reasons. First, even if their past skills did provide *some* evidence of their current and future skills, this evidence is weak. Second, that evidence is mostly screened off by current evidence of their skills, e.g. contemporary interviews, tests, and other modes of assessment.

Similarly, you might think that given Nietzsche's background views, morality's past is weak evidence for its present features, and much of its evidential value would be screened off by other forms of evidence that we could collect about contemporary morality. For it is plausible that we are in a better position to grasp the psychology and sociology of contemporary morality than we are of past morality.

Let us unpack this reasoning slowly. The crucial premise is what I will call *historicist distance*:

(3) *Historicist Distance* If the important or defining characteristics of morality have *changed* over time, then the important or defining

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*does the origin appear*" (D 44).

historical properties of past morality are poor predictors for the important or defining present and future properties of morality

Combining these premises, we can conclude that genealogy only provides good evidence for identifying historical properties (from (2) and (3)).

We can then use this last thought (combined with (1)) to show that genealogy does not provide good evidence for the properties that ground morality's value (by Nietzsche's lights). Since morality's history can't help much to identify present properties and future effects, all that is left for genealogy to do is help us identify morality's past features. However, if that is correct, then genealogy can't be much use in figuring out the things that matter for evaluation, according to Nietzsche.

I believe the existence of this puzzle is one reason that debunking interpretations of *GM* have been popular. For one can accept that even if Nietzsche's critical values are non-historical, various *epistemic* properties might still be historical (or history might be relevant to them). One then thinks of *GM* as a *prolegomenon* to assessing the value of values. We use *GM* to show that our values do not merit our allegiance on epistemic grounds, which then encourages us to step out of our naïve embedded perspective and examine their "value" according to a different (non-epistemic) external standard.

But if the debunking interpretation faces the problems that I identify, then how is this puzzle to be solved? In the rest of the paper, I canvas some distinct solutions, which will reveal some different ways to use genealogy for critical ends. In other work (Prescott-Couch ms.), I discuss the comparative merits of these differing solutions. Here, I simply mention the options so as to illustrate the wide variety of forms of genealogical critique beyond debunking.

### 3.2 Rejecting Anti-Historicism About Critical Values

One common way of resolving this puzzle is to reject or attenuate Nietzsche's anti-historicism about evaluative standards by holding that while *Nietzsche* doesn't care about historical properties, his opponents do. That is, he is making some kind of *internal* critique.

For instance, Gary Gutting (2005) argues that genealogy is useful for undermining the historical claims that supporters of some value system use as justification:

It is not, however, the genealogist who introduces the question of origins. This is done when, for example, the Ten Commandments are said to have moral authority because God handed them to Moses on Mount Sinai... (50)

Here, the point is that Nietzsche might think historical properties don't really matter to the value of values, but they are still important dialectically.

For example, if you think that the Ten Commandments have value or authority in virtue of having been delivered by God, then the value or authority of those Commands will depend on whether their historical origin is in fact God's commands. While this may look like similar to the debunking interpretation of *GM*, it is quite different. Tracing commands back to God vindicates those commands not because God is a reliable indicator of those commands being authoritative on independent grounds—God is not a reliable “thermometer” regarding the authority of commands. Rather, God's commands are what *make* those norms authoritative. Genealogy can contribute to critique by undercutting such proffered claims to authority grounded in history.

Note that this is different from undermining authority itself. The fact that e.g. a practice understands itself and claims authority for itself on the basis of its history does not mean that a history that conforms to its self-understanding actually gives it authority. Correspondingly, a history that *deviates* from this understanding does not necessarily undermine authority. It simply undercuts a proffered justification for it. For instance, imagine a king claims his authority is grounded in divine right, and genealogy shows that there is no divinity to grant that authority. This doesn't show the king has no authority, as his authority may derive from other grounds, such as that giving them this authority prevents nasty, brutish, and short lives.

Nevertheless, such a genealogy may still have critical bite by removing one potential source of authority.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3 Rejecting Historicism About Positive Values

A second option is to reject or attenuate historicism about positive morality. Here, the key idea here is that historical properties of morality *can* serve as good evidence for what morality is like *now* and what it will be like in the future (because past and present are similar). This is, roughly, because we should think of past morality as a kind of *simpler* and *less masked* version of current morality. Contemporary morality is overlaid with complexities and masked by various rationalizations, and if we look to the past, we can get at some of the *Ur*-dynamics that are still present but in a more obscure form.

Moreover, we might be able to see these dynamics more clearly in past situations than present ones because we are less personally and emotionally invested in viewing past situations in a particular way. That is, certain distorting factors and motivations for rationalization are removed.

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<sup>32</sup> Another version of this strategy is discussed by Queloz and Cueni (2019): illustrating that our values may be traced back to “suffering, cruelty, blood, and horror” (280). As Queloz and Cueni argue, Nietzsche himself does not think that our values having such origins undermines their authority, but others might. Thus, genealogy may subvert proffered claims to authority grounded in the “purity” of our values.

This is analogous to how it can be easier to see problems in others' intimate relationships than it is to see them in your own relationships, even though you may have more *information* about your own relationships.

There are different versions of this idea. Some commentators think that morality's past can reveal something about its *effects* (Leiter 2002) or its *function* (Reginster 2021; Creasy 2023). Others think that genealogy can reveal something about the current "expressive character" of morality, which is independent of its effects (Huddelston 2015). And others have thought that history reveals the quality or content or motivation for moral action (e.g. Reginster 1997). What is common among these various accounts is that *genealogy* is relevant for critique insofar as it gives us *evidence* about these non-historical features (whatever they may be). It is then these non-historical features of morality that are relevant to Nietzsche's critique of it.

### 3.4 Rejecting Historicist Distance

A final way to solve the puzzle is to reject historicist distance. One approach to genealogy that goes this route is that I will call "disunity accounts" or, in other work, "deconstructive genealogies" (Prescott-Couch ms.) Here, the key thought is that history might enable us to identify normatively relevant structural features of morality, such as that it has internal fragmentation or tension (Geuss 1994; Foucault 1978; Prescott-Couch ms.). On this view, Nietzsche's genealogy shows that our

contemporary normative framework is the product of a diverse set of sources, which suggests that different elements do not cohere together. For instance, parts of our framework may derive from slave morality, others from master morality, and others from other sources that Nietzsche considers in *GM*. Past morality may be important evidence regarding current morality's structural features without past and present being similar.

The critical importance of such fragmentation and tension is twofold. First, there is a meta-philosophical implication: there cannot be an account of the correct critical values according to which those critical values (i) fit our actual positive values and (ii) are unified. For instance, types of philosophical ethics that aim to "make sense" of our current normative framework by identifying a core set of principles that render coherent our considered judgements will not succeed. This point undercuts certain types of apologetic projects, those that aim to rationalize our conflicting normative views.

Second, the disunity of contemporary morality is substantively important. The internalization of a fragmented and conflicting set of values leads to exhausting conflicts within the will. As Nietzsche claims, 'modern people represent a contradiction of values, they fall between two stools, they say yes and no in the same breath' (CW Epilogue). Having internalized these conflicting values leads to 'paralysis of the will' (BGE 208) and the

desire ‘for an end to the war that he is’ (BGE 200). More broadly, the unity of persons (e.g. TI IX.49) and cultures (e.g. UM II.4) is a recurring ideal for Nietzsche, and many of Nietzsche’s thick evaluative concepts—such as sickness and decadence—have unity as some important component. On this view, Nietzschean genealogy highlights and explains these internal tensions and suggests they cannot be easily resolved.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We’ve discussed a number of ways to understand genealogical critique. First, we can use historical information in Explanatory and Off-track Arguments. Second, we can use historical information to assess the “value of values.” There are three ways we can do this. If the value of a value depends on its history, then genealogy is directly normatively relevant. If the value of a value *doesn’t* depend on its history, then genealogy may provide evidence of what that thing is like now. If our positive values have changed radically over time, it can be the resulting fragmentation and tension in our normative attitudes that has normative significance.

Moreover, in exploring these debunking arguments, we have seen ways in which Nietzsche’s assumptions differ in important respect from many assumptions in contemporary epistemology. Rather than his concern being epistemic evaluation or epistemic agency as such, Nietzsche’s concerns with epistemology are embedded in a broader concern about distinguishing



types of individuals, like the fanatic from the free spirit, and the social role of our beliefs and epistemic practices. In this way, Nietzsche exemplifies a “practical turn” in epistemology, although one that differs from current modes of politically engaged scholarship.<sup>33</sup>

## References

Abbreviations of Nietzsche’s Writings:

- A*      *The Antichrist*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1968)
- BGE*    *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2002)
- CW*      ‘The Case of Wagner: A Musician’s Problem’. Translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2005).
- D*        *Dawn*. Translated by Brittain Smith (Stanford, 2011)
- EH*      *Ecce Homo*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1979)
- eKGW*   *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe*. Edited by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari. Accessed at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>
- GM*      *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge, 2006)
- GS*      *The Gay Science*. Translated by Josephine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge, 2001)

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*HAH*    *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale  
(Cambridge, 1986)

*TI*        *The Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale  
(Penguin, 1968)

*UM*        *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale  
(Cambridge, 1997)

*Z*          *This Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Adrian del Caro  
(Cambridge, 2006)

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