<CT>More Modesty, Less Charity

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<abs>ABSTRACT: This discussion piece argues for more critical reflection on how we as interpreters of Nietzsche conceive our practice, and ultimately in favor of cultivating open-mindedness and pluralism about aims and methods. According to Nietzsche, "Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers," and "what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing, and with it the virtue of modesty" (*HH* I:2). Sometimes philosophers maintain that the chief virtue required in interpreting Nietzsche is not modesty, but charity. I want to question this. I examine a canonical statement concerning interpretive charity made by Maudemarie Clark in her book from 1990, according to which "only what the interpreter takes to be true or reasonable can function as the standard for the best position." I argue that there is no compelling reason to think that interpreting Nietzsche is done best by prioritizing a search for what the interpreter finds true, plausible, supported by evidence, or more interesting than alternative beliefs. First, being overconcerned with a philosophical position of one's own can tend in the direction of "hyper-charity" (proceeding as though, in Nadeem Hussain's formulation, "if p, then Nietzsche believes that p" were a good principle), with the potential result that Nietzsche gets left behind as irrelevant to the debate. Second, the suggested constraints on what counts as the best interpretation are of the interpreter's own making. While it is eminently permissible to decide that you will go about the interpretive task in the way Clark describes, and while doing so can be highly productive, there is nothing that makes it obligatory.

The approach is freely chosen, and is not the only choice open to us as interpreters. Third, given the unique character of Nietzsche's writings in particular, the question arises why we should be looking for a "position" primarily. There may be other aspects of his writing that are philosophically relevant, and reading Nietzsche might have the benefit of making us less sure, in ways we cannot predict in advance, about what should count as philosophy. </abs>
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Suppose someone asks, "Where does Nietzsche stand in the debate between today's error theorists and non-cognitivists?" Wouldn't that be rather like asking what Bismarck's policy is on the European Union or whether Mahler thinks MP3 streaming is killing live music? We could certainly pose a more careful, speculative kind of question, and ask what these figures from the late nineteenth century "would have thought" about today's issues (in the Bismarck case, people do ask this), and that exercise might be illuminating. But caveats apply: first, we should enter such an exercise in a hypothetical, exploratory frame of mind, using our imagination, but prepared to find no clear answer; second, any answer we produce can be illuminating about the historical figures only if we already have some independent grasp on where they stood on issues *they* addressed. But to think that the issues Nietzsche addresses are ours by default, and that our job is to look for *his* take on *our* issues, is to stray beyond what he "would have thought" into dubious questions of the former type, and ask what *is* his position, what *does* he think—in effect—about us?

Nietzsche diagnosed the problem in advance: "Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers." He offered a corrective: "what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing, and with it the virtue of modesty" (*HH* I:2). Sometimes philosophers maintain

that the chief virtue required in interpreting Nietzsche is not modesty, but charity. I want to question this. (As others have done. See esp. Tom Stern, "'Some Third Thing': Nietzsche's Words and the Principle of Charity," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47 [2016]: 287–302; R. Lanier Anderson, "Overcoming Charity: The Case of Maudemarie Clark's *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 25 [1996]: 307–41; and Paul S. Loeb, "Eternal Recurrence" in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 663.) I shall be arguing for more critical reflection on how we conceive our practice, and ultimately in favor of cultivating open-mindedness and pluralism about aims and methods.

Nadeem Hussain has recently targeted an extreme version of interpretive charity for criticism. After a rigorous search through various recent interpretations, Hussain reaches the conclusion: "one may well think . . . that we do not have adequate textual grounds for ascribing *any* particular metaethical view or stance to Nietzsche" ("Nietzsche's Metaethical Stance," in *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 412; see also J. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of his Metaethics and Epistemology* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974], 5; Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Metaethics: Against the Privilege Readings," *European Journal of Philosophy* 8 [2000]: 278–79; Andrew Huddleston, "Nietzsche's Meta-axiology: Against the Sceptical Readings," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 [2014]: 339). He then reflects that attempts to ascribe various such views may have been influenced by a "'principle of hyper-charity': if *p*, then Nietzsche believes that *p*." That hyperbolic principle is clearly a nonstarter once made explicit, and Hussain's point is not that anyone holds it, but that people sometimes write as though they did. We may wonder whether people sometimes stray close to implicit affirmation of other principles such as: "If not-*p*, then Nietzsche does not believe that *p*";

"If recent empirical evidence suggests that not-*p*, then Nietzsche does not believe that *p*"; "If *p* is implausible (to us), then Nietzsche does not believe that *p*"; "If *p* is more interesting (to us) than *q*, then Nietzsche believes that *p*." Some of these may seem less blatantly wrongheaded than Hussain's "hyper-charity," but they are all questionable. They all represent constraints on *our* being able to believe what Nietzsche appears to say—on *our* finding Nietzsche to believe something true, plausible, supported by later evidence, and more interesting than something else he could have believed.

It is no surprise—nor indeed a criticism—that philosophers should be concerned with finding things true, plausible, supported by evidence, and more interesting than alternative beliefs. But if that is your *exclusive* concern, the motivation for reading Nietzsche's texts, rather than anything else, is not evident. If it is at least your *primary* concern, you run the risk of Nietzsche's getting in the way. For consider Hussain's corrective message to the would-be "hyper-charity" enthusiast: "one should simply argue for the philosophical positions themselves, rather than engage in proxy wars by using historical figures" ("Nietzsche's Metaethical Stance," 412). That is excellent advice if the only game in town, or the one you regard as particularly privileged, is to come up with a metaethical theory. But what if one aspires first and foremost—or even at least as much—to be a scholar of Nietzsche? One can be both a metaethicist (or philosopher of some other stripe) and a Nietzsche scholar: the two roles interact in fruitful ways, and one could even argue that for good scholarship they must do so. But the aim of the scholar of Nietzsche is to interpret Nietzsche's texts, not to argue for philosophical positions. And there is no compelling reason to think that interpreting Nietzsche is done best by prioritizing a search for what *you* find true, plausible, supported by evidence, and more interesting than alternative beliefs.

This seems to contradict a canonical statement concerning interpretive charity made by Maudemarie Clark in her important book from 1990:

> <ext>Reasonable interpretation clearly demands that we attribute to a text the best position compatible with the relevant evidence about its meaning. But only what the interpreter takes to be true or reasonable can function as the standard for the best position. Appeal to the interpreters' own standards will be necessary not only when there are two equally plausible interpretations of a given text, but also for the purpose of selecting which texts to interpret or consider as evidence. . . . [T]he choice of passages upon which to base an interpretation is informed by what one takes to be reasonable, if not correct, positions on questions dealt with in the text. (*Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 29–30) </ext>

I shall leave aside "reasonable," since there is no timeless answer to the question what it is reasonable for someone to think, do, or write: it depends partly on the context they find themselves in, their aims and aspirations, their sources of information, and so on. The other idea here concerns a true or correct position. At its most simple, the idea is that we should privilege interpretations that present Nietzsche as believing something true. But this is not a reliable principle across the history of philosophy more generally. Did Kant think Newtonian physics was all there is to physics? Yes, but it is not true. Is it true that a drop of urine is an infinity of monads? No, but that gives me no inclination to say Leibniz didn't think so. And there's no reason why Nietzsche should be treated differently.

To avoid any confusion, let me say that Maudemarie Clark is well known as a philosophical interpreter and translator who has great respect for Nietzsche's texts and deep commitment to close reading and faithful interpretation of them. I simply want to reflect

critically on this 1990 statement concerning what interpretation of Nietzsche allegedly demands. It is one thing to make the standard of interpretation some very widely accepted truths. But, looking more closely, Clark's standard can in fact be read as what *the interpreter takes* to be true or correct, in a way that seems to dovetail with Hussain's advice to the imagined "hyper-charity" enthusiast. While one interpreter is arguing for Nietzsche's holding a position that *she* holds true, it is supposed to be demanded of me (as Nietzsche interpreter) that I interpret Nietzsche as holding what *I hold true*. Under this description, the exercise of interpreting Nietzsche threatens to become a surrogate for a philosophical argument between two contemporary philosophers about matters on which they have a position. The more it advances toward being such a surrogate, the more Hussain's advice begins to sound appropriate: if Nietzsche is not helping you, ditch him, and just argue for what you take to be true or correct. But as "interpreting Nietzsche" shades into being just another way of pursuing contemporary philosophical debates, to which Nietzsche's contribution may in principle turn out to be of little interest, the idea that the process is well designed to enhance our understanding of a historical philosopher becomes increasingly tenuous.

My first point, then, is that being *overconcerned* with a philosophical position of one's own can tend in the direction of "hyper-charity" and threaten to leave Nietzsche behind. This kind of observation is nothing new: for decades historians of philosophy have challenged analytic philosophy's automatic privileging of "rational reconstruction" (see Michael Beaney, "Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy: The Development of the Idea of Rational Reconstruction," in *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, ed. E. H. Reck [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013], 231–60). And the history of philosophy has arguably become more self-aware and more pluralistic as a result. Rational reconstructions can be brilliant, insightful,

and great pieces of philosophy. But there is no rule that privileges them as the best or the only way to set about interpreting historical texts. This brings me to my second point. Clark writes as though there is only one methodological approach available, and that she is constrained to take it. She states (with my emphases) that "reasonable interpretation . . . *demands*" a certain approach, that "*only* what the interpreter takes to be true" can function as a standard, and that appeal to an interpreter's own standards "will be *necessary*" in certain circumstances. I suggest, to the contrary, that these constraints are of the interpreter's own making. It is eminently permissible to decide that you will go about the interpretive task in this way, and doing so can be highly productive, but there is nothing that makes it obligatory. The approach is freely chosen, and is not the only choice open to us as interpreters.

My third point is a little more open-ended: given the unique character of Nietzsche's writings in particular, why should we even be looking for a "position" primarily? Whatever happened to Nietzsche's work being "booby-trapped not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory" (Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," in *Making Sense of Humanity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 66)? Or to Richard Rorty's "edifying philosopher": "Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], 369)? There is something to these observations. We all know that Nietzsche of all people doesn't typically set out a propositional claim and argue for it head-on. His writing is more sophisticated than that, which is why there really is little point in studying Nietzsche only for the bits that somebody else could have come up with and published in a refereed journal. If we are lucky we might find a

"position," but is there any principled reason not to cast the net wider and include in our interpretive purview the many strands that the author of these texts has clearly placed there—patterns, dialogues, ironies, allusions, debunkings, and any number of further aspects? It might be suggested that these matters be left to intellectual historians and literary theorists, on the grounds that the "real" philosophy is not to be found there. But is such a blanket ruling justified? For one thing, some philosophy—ancient skepticism, Buddhism, Wittgenstein—has been about not holding on to "positions," but instead inventing ways of weaning ourselves off them. And in a more general sense reading Nietzsche might have the benefit of making us less sure, in ways we cannot predict in advance, about what should count as philosophy.

Nietzsche knew that philosophers will tend to fall into a characteristic habit: "they take the most recent manifestation of man [. . .] as the fixed form from which one has to start out" (*HH* I:2). This seems to include the habit of taking the most recent manifestation of philosophy in the same spirit. Of course, we cannot escape our own horizons, abandon all our vocabulary, and forget what we have learned. We interpret from where we stand. But if anybody thinks that analytic philosophizing as it has been practiced for the last few decades *fixes* the nature of all philosophy, either in its form or in its content, they are thinking immodestly. Venturing back in time to impress the same form and content on earlier texts might well be called a kind of intellectual colonialism. It would at any rate be to lack historical sense, and so to apply a thought like this to Nietzsche in particular would show us as deaf to the very author we are interested in understanding.