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Translating Nietzsche's Atheism(s): A World Beyond the Ethical Imperative

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Abstract

The paper will examine Kaufmann's translation of The Genealogy of Morals (GM), specifically a section of GM III §27, where the translator's choice of a single word skews an important insight of Nietzsche's on the question of modern atheism. Kaufmann's influential translation, highly regarded for its stylistic refinement, has served as the starting point for most English translations that followed, and so his rendering of this section continues to impact the current Anglo-American reception of Nietzsche's work. By challenging Kaufmann's rendering of an important section of GM III §27, the paper will extrapolate a more nuanced understanding of atheism from Nietzsche's position. This awareness problematizes current attempts to equate Nietzsche with a scientific naturalist program.

Keywords: *Walter Kaufmann; atheism; modern science; British naturalism; ascetic ideal*

Introduction

In GM III §27, Nietzsche introduces a brief, though significant discussion on the question of atheism. The section opens with a critique of the “comedians of the ascetic ideal.” The latter critique is a continuation of an argument that he laid out in the prior section (GM III §26). But then, suddenly, Nietzsche shifts gear, ceases that line of attack, and introduces a new polemical target. The subsequent passage begins—and I quote from the original German text:

Dieser Wille aber, dieser *Rest* von Ideal, ist, wenn man mir glauben will, jenes Ideal selbst in seiner strengsten, geistigsten Formulierung, esoterisch ganz und gar, alles Aussenwerks entkleidet, somit nicht sowohl sein *Rest*, als sein *Kern*. Der unbedingte redliche Atheismus (-- und *seine* Luft allein athmen wir, wir geistigeren Menschen dieses Zeitalters!) steht demgemäss *nicht* im Gegensatz zu jenem Ideale, wie es den Anschein hat; er ist vielmehr nur eine seiner letzten Entwicklungsphasen, eine seiner Schlussformen und inneren Folgerichtigkeiten, - er ist die Ehrfurcht gebietende *Katastrophe* einer zweitausendjährigen Zucht zur Wahrheit, welche am Schlusse sich die *Lüge im Glauben an Gott* verbietet. (emphasis Nietzsche's) (GM III §27)

The objective of my presentation is three-fold. First, I will discuss Walter Kaufmann's influential translation of this passage and show how Kaufmann creates a false impression

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of Nietzsche's position simply by misrepresenting a single key word.² The goal of this exercise is not to point out Kaufmann's interpretative lapse, but rather to use my clarification of the section as a means of contrast and to tease out the important implications of Nietzsche's stance.

The second objective will be to give an alternative reading of the same passage and to clarify its meanings so that we can proceed to discuss its repercussions. Finally, I will argue that a different understanding of this passage highlights Nietzsche's dual objective within the GM as a whole: namely, to disentangle a specific Nietzschean strand of atheism from the latter term's association with the scientific program of the nineteenth century and, simultaneously, to thwart modern science's attempt to insert an alternative practical ethics for the discredited values of traditional metaphysics.

Kaufmann's translation

The key sentence of Kaufmann's translation that will interest us here is the one that begins: "**Der unbedingte redliche Atheismus... etc. etc.**" Kaufmann renders the passage in the following way—and I quote from his version:

"Unconditional honest atheism (and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore *not* the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution... etc. etc."³

The main problem with Kaufmann is his translation of *demgemäß* in this sentence. It is a seemingly insignificant word—one could almost call it a filler word, a throw-away word—and it is, in fact, a bit antiquated and difficult to render into an English idiom. Nietzsche's usage further confuses since it is not readily apparent to what the word *demgemäß* refers in the previous sentence. *Gemäss* *what*, exactly? "According to" *what*? A strict grammarian looking at the sentence might be tempted to give Nietzsche a poor mark for not clarifying his antecedent, like when teachers used to tell us never to use "this" or "it" in a new sentence unless the antecedent were perfectly clear.

How does Kaufmann translate the word? With "therefore." Why is that a problem? For one, "therefore" is a poor choice even on its own terms. In English, "therefore" implies a logical, causal conclusion from something previously referenced; for example, to put it in simple terms: "it's raining outside; *therefore*, you should take your umbrella." *Demgemäß* in no way conveys that sense of conclusiveness. Rather, Nietzsche uses it here in a much less explicit and more general sense—more like: "according to that principle," or "in that sense," or "correspondingly."

We can now return to the beginning of Nietzsche's thought. He states the following — and I will stop to examine each significant part of the translated section step by step:

² Kaufmann collaborated on the translation with R.J. Hollingdale, but Kaufmann can be considered the primary figure in this edition (which includes *Ecce Homo*, translated by Kaufmann alone), and I will refer to their translation as the Kaufmann translation. (The back cover text of the edition, in fact, refers to "Walter Kaufmann's masterful translations...") Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). The popular edition *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), which contains passages from the GM (including this one), mentions Kaufmann as sole translator. Despite my critique of his translation of a single word, I will quote from Kaufmann's translation throughout for the sake of convenience and because I have no significant issue with the remainder of his translation.

³ This section appears on p. 160 of the Kaufmann translation.



“Everywhere else that the spirit is strong, mighty and without counterfeit today, it does without ideals of any kind—”

Using the qualifier *ohne Falschmünzerei* (“without counterfeit”) here, Nietzsche positively contrasts this more promising line of thinkers with the so-called “comedians of the ascetic ideal,” whom he had critiqued in GM III §26.

“the popular expression for this abstinence is ‘atheism’ --:”

Nietzsche mysteriously places quotation marks around the key word “atheism.” The reason is: precisely because it is a *popular* understanding of atheism—namely, a *false* understanding—against which he is about to juxtapose his superior sense of the term. He concludes by saying: this brand of atheism (*with* quotation marks) does without the ideal...

“except for its will to truth.”

In other words, even though modern atheists have discarded all ideals, or false, comforting idealism, they have yet to discard the “will to truth.”

“But this will, [Nietzsche continues,] this *remnant* of an ideal, is, if you will believe me, this ideal itself in its strictest, most spiritual formulation, esoteric through and through, with all external additions abolished, and thus not so much its remnant as its *kernel*.”

And now the relevant passage (in my rendering):

“Unconditional honest atheism [*note: without quotation marks this time*] (-- and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is *not*, in that sense, the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather one of the last phases of its evolution.... etc. etc.”

Now let’s compare the above to Kaufmann’s version:

“Unconditional honest atheism (and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore *not* the antithesis of that ideal...”

Kaufmann’s choice of “therefore” for *demgemäß* suggests that the “unconditional honest atheism,” to which Nietzsche now refers, is an extension of the *same* form of atheism mentioned in the previous sentence.⁴ Kaufmann creates a false parallelism to the previously stated brand of “popular” atheism; he does not recognize that Nietzsche has, in fact, subtly introduced a new form of atheism: *his* form, the only “unconditional honest” form and the only one that truly merits the term atheism *without* quotations marks. Nietzsche does not establish a definite conclusion, but a *Steigerung*, or heightening, of the previously stated.

My translation of *demgemäß* into “in that sense,” while not perfect, tries to remain stylistic and still avoid the logical conclusiveness of Kaufmann’s “therefore.” *Demgemäß* here only implies, more neutrally, “based on that principle,” “following the logic of what I previously said”; it establishes a nuanced contrast to the previous thought, it does not draw ultimate

⁴ Despite differing from Kaufmann on other points of translation, Carol Diethe retains “therefore” in her version of the GM. This is an indication of Kaufmann’s sustained influence since his translation remains the starting point for most subsequent English translations and thereby continues to impact the Anglo-American reception of Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 118.

conclusions from it. Kaufmann's translation, on the other hand, appears to endorse a blanket critique of *all* atheism, when, instead, Nietzsche speaks to a superior understanding of atheism, an "unconditional honest" atheism—the only one, he suggests, that truly merits that name.

Was Kaufmann's lapse purely stylistic? Or was there a hidden agenda? I do not want to conjecture about Kaufmann's motivations. Suffice it to say that he translated Nietzsche as he understood him, as it felt right to him; in this passage, "therefore" must have felt right to him. Kaufmann's word choice, however, does reflect an overall tendency on his part to tone down Nietzsche's controversial rhetoric and to render him more mainstream. Coincidentally or not, by turning Nietzsche's more sophisticated position into an apparent condemnation of atheism *tout court*, Kaufmann transformed Nietzsche into a conservative critic of modern atheism.

Historical Context

Before I return to this passage, I will need to give some background information. This passage is important, because Nietzsche here implicates the group of "English psychologists," genealogists, and Darwinists, whom the GM as a whole targets.⁵ For explicit verification of this point, one need only to look to the Preface of the GM and the first lines of GM I §1. Whereas Nietzsche had introduced other exponents of the ascetic ideal in earlier sections of GM III—namely, the philosopher (GM III §5-10), the priest (GM III §11-23), at times, the artist (GM III §2-4)—he *concludes* his essay and *culminates* his argument with the modern scientific atheist. This is not coincidental; it is the final polemical point of GM III—and indeed, *the entire GM*. Note further that GM III §27 is the penultimate section, both of the final essay as well as the work itself, before Nietzsche's famous rhetorical *dénouement* in GM III §28.

Who were the "English psychologists?" In Nietzsche's parlance, the term covers a wide range of scientifically minded and schooled thinkers—a broad intellectual lineage. On the hand, it certainly includes his *German* contemporaries, the Darwinist Paul Rée and Eugen Dühring.⁶ But it also includes the Englishmen Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, Darwinian sympathizers, even Darwin himself. Aside from that, the term references an established tradition of British naturalist philosophy—from Hobbes to Locke and Hume—but, then again, to current British materialists such as Lubbock, Buckle, and Bagehot. What does this diverse group have in common? Here the common denominator is a general scientific mindset and, to varying degrees, an atheistic orientation, as well as an overall commitment to a naturalist and sensualist program, genealogical perspectives, and a predilection for certain categories such as altruism, egoism, and a sympathetic sense. But the passage also implicates modern science and scientists in the broader sense since they proceed from the same set of basic assumptions.

My Reading

For Nietzsche, then, these thinkers represented the "popular atheists" of GM III §27. Though superior to the "comedians of the ascetic ideal," since their spirit was "strong,

⁵ See Dirk R. Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87-88.

⁶ Nietzsche explicitly references his former friend Rée in the Preface (GM P 4) and Dühring in a lengthier section in GM II §11.



mighty and without counterfeit,” they were still deficient. Heirs to a long and established tradition of materialist-scientific thought, they were naturalists—committed to anti-idealistic, anti-metaphysical explications of nature and human behavior. The “faith” uniting them, Nietzsche argues, was to have no explicit faith at all, that is, to be free from all superstitions, delusions, and ideals, and to work hard, determinedly, and soberly for the cause of truth, wherever that might lead. The key point that Nietzsche then makes is to argue that their commitment to “truth” does not, in the end, lead them to oppose or question the ideal; on the contrary, their belief in truth is a remnant and hard core of that very same asceticism: “[T]his ‘modern science’—let us face this fact!—is the *best* ally the ascetic ideal has at present, and precisely because it is the most unconscious, involuntary, hidden, and subterranean ally!” (GM III §25) Modern atheists embody the terrifying “perverse” logic⁷ of a core asceticism fighting against more baroque embellishments of the ideal without truly uprooting the bedrock of the ascetic impulse. In fact, their efforts only succeed in entrenching the ascetic ideal ever more permanently.

And now we arrive at the relevant passage—and here I paraphrase: **“In that sense or understanding (*demgemäss*), unconditional honest atheism doesn’t stand opposed to the ascetic ideal, as it might appear; it is rather one of the last stages of its development.”** The interesting qualification Nietzsche makes—one which he, in fact, emphasizes—is to argue that his brand of atheism does not stand in opposition to the ideal. Why does he make that claim? If the ascetic ideal were the enemy, so to speak, wouldn’t it be logical to fight against it? There are two reasons he makes this distinction. For one, Nietzsche hereby distinguishes his “unconditional honest atheism” from the other popular forms. Whereas the atheists claim to be free from ideals and to oppose the idealistic impulse, Nietzsche indicates that his atheism doesn’t even oppose the ideal. Why? Because he recognizes that opposition to the ideal would merely represent a further manifestation of the ideal—in fact, the ideal at its very core. To fight against the ideal would reflect a further expression of decadent asceticism.⁸

Secondly, by arguing that his atheism arises out of the scientific-ascetic impulse itself, Nietzsche implies that modern science need not be opposed to the ascetic ideal; indeed, it represents one of the necessary final stages and consequences, the internal logic, of asceticism’s long, consequential history. His form of atheism, therefore, doesn’t combat ideals from the basis of science and its higher truth claim; rather, it has discovered the unacknowledged ascetic impulse behind modern science by having pushed the inherent scientific-ascetic “will to truth”-imperative to its final, radical, and climactic conclusion. The “will to truth”-imperative behind this last stage of ascetic development, i.e., the stage of ascetic science, must push itself toward its own dissolution.⁹ That, Nietzsche claims, is in the nature of its own internal dynamic; it is a manifestation of the “law of all life”: **“All**

⁷ In the Preface to GM, Nietzsche speaks of “an upside-down and perverse species of genealogical hypothesis, the genuinely *English* type” (GM P 4).

⁸ As Nietzsche lays out in GM III, specifically in relation to the priests, asceticism is a form of sickness—or, as he would later term it, *décadence*. In his later critique of Socrates, Nietzsche wrote: “Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power: what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of decadence” (II, Socrates §11). Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Ideals, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 166.

⁹ “(The same evolutionary course in India; completely independent or ours [...]), the same ideal leads to the same conclusion; the decisive point is reached five centuries before the beginning of the European calendar, with Buddha [...])” (GM III §27).

great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming: thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of 'self-overcoming' in the nature of life."

Another articulation of Nietzsche's final position can be found in GM III §24. There he writes: **"When the Christian crusaders in the Orient encountered the invincible order of Assassins, that order of free spirits *par excellence* [...] they obtained in some way or other a hint concerning that symbol and watchword reserved for the highest ranks alone as their *secretum*: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' Very well, that was *freedom of spirit*; in that way the faith in truth itself was *abrogated*."**

And in A §46, Nietzsche recognizes a parallel example of this principle in the utterance of Pontius Pilate in front of Christ: **"The noble scorn of a Roman when faced with an unashamed mangling of the word 'truth' gave the New Testament its only statement of any value,—its critique, even its *annihilation*: 'What is truth! ...'"**¹⁰

Implications of Nietzsche's Position

Now let us briefly address the implications of the position that emerges from this new rendering of the section in GM III §27. In the first instance, Nietzsche clearly subverts the ethical imperative behind the modern scientific enterprise. Indeed, the entire GM can be seen as an attempt to sabotage the genealogists' (i.e., naturalists') efforts to naturalize morality and thereby to give moral categories an alternative non-metaphysical scientific grounding. Nietzsche cleverly dissects the atheists' drive to dislodge traditional morality. He reveals that their efforts to replace that form of morality with a practical ethics derived from naturalism reflected an essential unmitigated asceticism. The unacknowledged idealism motivating them, Nietzsche argues, is their unshaken belief in *the value of truth*. While the latter led them to reveal the false premises and "lies" surrounding previous metaphysical systems, it merely gave them the license to look for the "true" natural sources for morality. From that naturalist basis a practical naturalized ethics could be constructed. The genealogists' alternative naturalist paradigm for the origins of morality never intends to overturn morality; it offers a whole new model of ethics and ethical behavior construed from alternative naturalist premises.

But where does that leave Nietzsche? Based on Nietzsche's argumentation, an alternative ethical program would be quite impossible, for it too would need to be based on ultimate truth-claims. But let us not forget: Nietzsche argues that "unconditional honest atheism" is the final stage of asceticism, the point where the will to truth recognizes the *invalidity* of *all* truth. On the other hand, the atheists' ethical program emerges directly from their uncompromising *belief* in truth. "Truth at all costs" and the findings of science are now deemed superior to traditional moral standards.

What can be said, then, about Nietzsche's ethical perspective? Very little. In fact, to put it bluntly: it is difficult to construct a complete system of ethics and ethical behavior from the secret motto of the Order of Assassins or from the enigmatic words of a Pontius Pilate.

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.



But Nietzsche's final objective in GM III is not to offer a radical blueprint for an alternative ethical program. It is merely to *hint* at a world beyond the ethical imperative.