“A philosophical attempt to work out a universal World-History … must be regarded as possible and even as promoting the purpose of nature itself.” (Immanuel Kant, “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht,” Ninth Proposition)

“Perhaps it is precisely here that we still discover the realm of our invention, the realm where even we can be original, for instance as parodists of World-History and the Hanswursts of God …” (BGE §223)

“Every time a beginning that is calculated to mislead; cool, scientific, even ironic, deliberately foreground, deliberately holding off.” (EH “Books” GM)

The thesis of this paper is an interpretive one about Nietzsche’s work On the Genealogy of Morals: its use of irony is so pervasive that it cannot be relied upon to report Nietzsche’s views, even at the moment of writing, on a historical sequence of events or the causal sources of the phenomena that Nietzsche identifies. Nietzsche does not assert, and thus is not committed to, most of the claims contained in that text. Indeed, I shall argue that Nietzsche is not committed to any claim about what might be called the theoretical terms of the account: the types, actors, causal mechanisms, or psychological states.

Note that my argument concerns what Daniel Conway has called the “performance,” as opposed to the “practice” of genealogy. That is, what I primarily address here is not the issue of what philosophical position is constituted or generated by genealogical method, but the generally neglected issue of how the text of the Genealogy operates in presenting its claims. So, for example, my conclusions leave open the matters of whether and how any form of historical explanation can carry critical force; instead I address the more basic and limited issue of the
extent to which the *Genealogy* can be used to evidence any commitment to a philosophic position. Because it shares the idea that Nietzsche is making a concession to “epistemic restrictions,” my argument dovetails, in ways that I will discuss briefly in concluding, with a reading of genealogy as “internal critique.” But since the reading that I propose here calls into question the assertions of the *Genealogy*, it does not compel an “internal critique” reading of genealogical method, or any other.

I have two further qualifications before I proceed to defend my interpretation. One further clarification of my thesis is that, in invoking “irony,” I am not referring to what might be called “historical irony,” namely that the meaning or structure of historical processes are opaque to the agents who actually participate in them. Historical irony is a feature of Nietzsche’s genealogical claims, but my thesis concerns the claims themselves, and not their content. Second, although nothing commits Nietzsche to any position regarding what I have called the theoretical terms of the genealogy, I am not claiming that Nietzsche is committed to taking them as fictions, either. Rather, I am claiming that Nietzsche does not commit himself one way or the other to their truth. For reasons that I shall briefly discuss, we can ascribe various genealogical elements to Nietzsche’s position, but only as mediated by a general understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophical approach and aims.

This paper will be divided into five sections. The first section presents some philosophical-historical context for my thesis. The second section makes the basic textual argument, which I take to be obvious once it is pointed out. The third section offers a somewhat speculative account, involving the avoidance of a perspectival problem, of why Nietzsche’s text is ironic. I take the truth of my thesis to be independent of the success of the speculative account, but I hope that this account can at least provide some confirmation, by providing a
plausible answer to the obvious question of what the purpose of irony in this context might be. The fourth section of this paper draws out some of the philosophical-hermeneutic implications of my thesis by relating it to two recent interpretation of the Genealogy. My immediate aim there is to show that only one interpretation turns out to be compatible with an ironic reading. The deeper point there, however, is that Nietzsche’s orientation to truth in the Genealogy turns out to be more subtle and involved than a choice between fiction and literal truth would suggest. A fifth section offers a conclusion.

I. Context

The aim of this section is to present some of the philosophical-historical context for Nietzsche’s ironic approach in On the Genealogy of Morals. I hope to show that Nietzsche’s approach, although eccentric, is continuous with the range of theoretical options available. In particular, it aligns itself with the mode of history that purports to offer, in a way independent of historical facts, an evaluative purchase on ideals and human nature.

If one considers the modern, secular attempts to understand ourselves historically, two distinct modes of philosophy of history are encountered. They have much in common. They are both cosmopolitan: they both recount isolated particular identities converging on a common human narrative. Each characterizes us with what might be called negative perfectibility: we have a seemingly infinite capacity progressively to corrupt ourselves. This is, furthermore, related to two additional commonalities. One is that history is an account not merely of what happened but of human agency, or of our own productiveness. Two, history undermines the self-image of modernity, showing the deep contingency of its most esteemed accomplishments.
Despite these commonalities, there are nevertheless two distinct modes. One belongs to Rousseau; the other belongs to Marx.

We can examine Rousseau’s approach in this exhortation from the Second Discourse:

Let us begin therefore by setting aside all the facts, because they do not touch upon the question. One must not take the investigations that can be carried out on this subject for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings, more appropriate for clearing up the nature of things than for showing their true origin …

Rousseau is not always precise in his characterization, but here he is quite clear. The factual is not merely regretfully absent, but irrelevant. Rousseau’s aim is to identify “the nature of things” rather than the “true origin,” and for this “hypothetical and conditional reasonings” are appropriate. One does not appeal to hypothetical reasonings, that is, on account of epistemic problems. Mill, for example, does this when he offers a conjectural explanation for gender difference because the historical record is opaque. Rousseau certainly faces epistemic problems, but he appeals to hypothetical reasonings rather than chronicled events because one can “draw from them the nature of things” and thereby derive conclusions that are not thereby “conjectural.”

Rousseau emphasizes this basic feature of his approach to the philosophy of history and suggests some additional ones in this passage:

Because it is no easy enterprise to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to know well a state that does not exist, that perhaps did not exist, and probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have correct notions in order to judge our present state.

Three of the four main features of Rousseau’s approach are on display here. First, its speculative character is shown in Rousseau’s concession that there never was nor will be a state of nature. At the same time, however, this is speculation rather than fiction. Rousseau is not indifferent to the realism of the story and the causal effectiveness of its elements. Although nothing like
empirical evidence could play any straightforward role, arriving at the “correct notions” is still
critical. Second, Rousseau’s approach is \textit{cosmopolitan} in taking “the present nature of man” as
its focus rather than some particular group. Third, this approach is fundamentally \textit{evaluative}.
Rousseau’s aim here is “to judge our present state” – that is, to render a verdict on it. The
historical narrative, rather than offering facts about the past, offers an evaluative purchase on the
present. A fourth basic feature of this approach will be easier to identify after having clarified its
opposite.

Marx furnishes the contrary mode of philosophy of history. The distinctiveness of
Marx’s approach is often obscured by Marx himself, who typically writes as if everyone else,
especially Hegel, were attempting an especially stupid version of Marx’s own project. Marx,
that is, writes as if others are attempting something like a historical chronicle, and simply
identifying the wrong events or causal factors.\textsuperscript{10} Hegel and others no doubt have different views
on what counts as “the real existing world”\textsuperscript{11} and on the causal effectiveness of reasons.
Focusing on social ontology conceals, however, the fundamental philosophical-historical
difference, that Marx, almost uniquely, intends to convey an actual course of events. Marx
writes in \textit{The German Ideology}, for example, “Where speculation ends, where real life starts,
there consequently begins real, positive science, the exhibition [\textit{Darstellung}] of the practical
activity, of the practical process of development of men.”\textsuperscript{12} This is the fundamental difference
with the Rousseauian mode, upon which the other differences rest. This approach purports
merely to exhibit the processes of real life.

That difference alone is sufficient to distinguish Marx from nearly everyone else. Oddly
enough, it is probably Kant who remains closest here: Kant aims to show, or at least hope, that
causal interactions in nature could exhibit a moral destiny for humankind. But another
difference with Rousseau eliminates any affinity with Kant. “Communists,” Marx writes, “do not preach morality at all.” Morality is part of “ideology,” and thus one cannot offer evaluative judgments that do not reflect particular material relations. The interest in actual events and the relegation of morality to ideology arguably still leaves this approach close to Hume, if Hume could be said to have a philosophy of history. Marx, however, in exhibiting “the actual relations springing from an existing class struggle,” is, unlike Hume, concerned with representing events as human activity, and in taking these events as therefore having a logical structure. Here Marx is close to Rousseau. He represents human action as forming historical processes that generate their own contradictions. Since moral criticism is out of the question for Marx, exhibiting these contradiction remains as the theoretical goal.

A final basic feature of Marx’s approach helps to distinguish it from Rousseau’s. In The Poverty of Philosophy and elsewhere, Marx borrows a distinction from Proudhon between the “order in time” and “order in the idea.” These refer to the presentation of historical narratives, and of course whether one presents the narrative elements according to their chronological sequence or according to what Proudhon calls “their logical sequence and their serial relation in the understanding.” Marx berates Proudhon for departing from the order in time; any such departure, insists Marx, can only be the product of dogmatism. Unlike Rousseau, Marx insists that the only acceptable scientific approach is to follow the order in time.

The contrast that I am offering between two modes of the philosophy of history is sketchy, but it allows me to make a preliminary suggestion about the Genealogy of Morals. My preliminary suggestion is that Nietzsche’s text belongs to the Rousseauian mode. The Genealogy is speculative rather than materialist, it offers an evaluative stance, and it follows the order in ideas rather than the order in time. The book presents nothing like empirical evidence;
the closest that Nietzsche comes is some mostly speculative etymology and a long quotation from Tertullian. The “critique of moral values” that Nietzsche promises is much more like Rousseau’s judgment of our present state than like Marx’s delegation of morality to ideology: Nietzsche promises to inform us about what can be valuable or worthwhile in human life. And we can see the Genealogy’s allegiance to order in ideas in that it offers three separate sets of famously unreconciled narratives, each organized around a conceptual matrix.

At this point I can re-offer my thesis with a new characterization. My thesis is that Nietzsche was rhetorically Marx but methodologically Rousseau. Nietzsche adopts the rhetoric of what Marx would call “positive science,” but always does so in the service of speculative, evaluative points. The next section will attempt to demonstrate that gap between rhetoric and method; the following section will offer an explanation for it.

II. Text

In this section, I present the evidence in favor of taking the Genealogy of Morals as ironic. I present two kinds of evidence. The first is meta-textual: it consists in Nietzsche’s statements about and other characterizations of the text of the Genealogy. I conclude that, although this evidence is univocal, we could nevertheless doubt its reliability. I then present the properly textual evidence. This falls into two groups, which I refer to as silence and voices. The former is susceptible to what I call the “argument from omission,” but collectively I take them to achieve the minimal aim of this section, that is, to establish that the text of the Genealogy is ironic.

First, although this is exactly the issue in dispute, I cannot resist reflecting for a moment on Nietzsche’s tone. Nietzsche’s language in the Genealogy, with its illnesses, forces, drives,
instincts, and quanta of this and that, is so coolly serious that it must be unserious. This sentence, at the very least, which follows a series of claims about the antitheses of animal instincts and the immeasurability of punishment must be a joke: “This finishes up once and for all with the origin of the ‘Holy God’” (*GM* II:23). Surely Nietzsche thought his account was convincing; but even *The Antichrist* bears witness that he did not think of it as conclusive.\(^{20}\)

In any case, we have a stronger reason to think that Nietzsche’s discourse in the *Genealogy* is ironic: he tells us so. The first set of meta-textual evidence comes from the *Genealogy*’s own Preface, where Nietzsche reports that what he really cared about “was something much more important than hypothesisizing [Hypothesenwesen] about the origin of morality.” (*GM* P5) This already gives us reason to suspect irony: his discourse, which seems to consist of fussing over hypotheses about the origin of morality, addresses something that he does not now, nor has ever, actually cared about. And Nietzsche reinforces this suspicion when he clarifies his real concern, “the problems of morality” (*GM* P7). These problems, says Nietzsche, are worth taking seriously, and indeed more seriously than anything else, so that “some day one will perhaps receive permission to take them *cheerfully*” (*GM* P7). Treating this entire subject matter as one worth inquiring into, in other words, is simply a necessary first step to finding the whole matter risible. Hypothesizing is possibly comic and certainly instrumental rather than representational. This should not be surprising. The subtitle of the *Genealogy* – another piece of meta-textual evidence – is, after all, “eine Streitschrift,” “a polemic,” and not, say, “a naturalistic account of moral phenomena.”

That the text of the *Genealogy* is purposeful in a way not directed to representation is also disclosed by the passages from Nietzsche that I used as epigraphs. The first, from *Beyond Good and Evil*, does not specifically address the *Genealogy*, which had not been written yet. But it
comes from the work immediately preceding the *Genealogy*, which Nietzsche in turn characterized, on its title page, as “supplementing” the earlier work. Nietzsche had previously attributed a “parody of all history [Welthistorie]” to Eduard von Hartmann, to whom he ascribed “unconscious irony”; I take the implication to be that an iteration of parody would have to be *conscious* irony. The passage offers us the hopeful possibility of finding our originality as “parodists of World-History and the Hanswursts of God.” What I take this to suggest is that in 1886–7 Nietzsche was consciously writing in the context of cosmopolitan history that I characterized in the previous section, and would accordingly be aware that the *Genealogy* would seem perverse – or at least parodic – from the vantage of that tradition. As Nietzsche puts it, rather than fulfilling a natural, rational, or revolutionary theodicy, his history makes us “Hanswursts of God.” If all this seems too indefinite to draw any conclusions from, my final piece of meta-textual evidence is unequivocal. Nietzsche writes, in *Ecce Homo*, specifically about the *Genealogy*, which he re-identifies as a polemic, “Every time a beginning that is *supposed to* mislead, cool, scientific, even ironic, intentionally foreground, intentionally holding back.” This asserts that the text is ironic, or more specifically: the text is meant superficially to appear as objective representation, but such “scientific” claims are in fact misleading because some other purposefulness is at work, presumably in the background. Hypothesizing once again seems instrumental rather than representational, and possibly buffoonish, risible, or parodic, but certainly ironic.

This conclusion might, however, be thought too strong. One difficulty is that the meta-text might be unreliable; in fact, it might itself be ironic. The *Genealogy* could be deadly earnest, and everything else ironic commentary on what it is bound to be mistaken for. Furthermore, even if we take the meta-text seriously, we are not forced to an ironic conclusion.
Even if it is conceded that the genealogical inquiry is instrumental, and that its end is to make itself risible, that does not necessarily diminish its representational function. The whole enterprise might be primarily pedagogical, in that it conveys various facts not for the sake of those facts themselves, but for the sake of some deeper understanding. One does not, for example, solve problems in a geometry class because one cares about those particular triangles, but perhaps to become better at math; and yet this does not impugn the accuracy of the proofs that one completes. Similarly, one might say, the discourse of the genealogy is pedagogical, but all of its individual claims are meant to be taken seriously.

I concede both of these arguments. I concede, that is, that I need to provide additional reasons for taking the genealogical account as ironic. To settle this, then, we shall have to examine the main text of the *Genealogy*. The first set of textual evidence that I wish to discuss comes from the trope of silence that Nietzsche uses to call attention to his irony. This is its first instance in the *Genealogy*: “Oh how fortunate we are, we knowing ones, provided only that we know how to keep silent long enough!”(*GM* P3; emphasis added). Here the idea of *keeping silent* seems to be an extension of the pedagogical point. The suggestion is that the best way to learn, perhaps in general or perhaps in the special case of the origin of morality, is to conduct inquiries without giving much thought to the end to which one inquires, and even without giving much attention to what one thinks about the object of inquiry. Keeping silent about these broader issues, and focusing on the inquiry itself, is the best way to make the inquiry produce some resolution on the broader issues.

Silence indeed fills out Nietzsche’s pedagogical point, but it does more than this, too. What Nietzsche’s claim about silence indicates is that he is withholding some of what he has to say about the origin of morality. Indeed, the first invocation of silence also indicates that there is
something else that Nietzsche wants to say, and that there is a proper measure of how long to conceal it. This is odd: theoretical discussions do not, typically, call attention to their own lacunae, or indicate that these lacunae have a prescribed duration. But Nietzsche is indicating that something other than the theoretical discussion is going on.

The silence accompanies the entire discussion, but Nietzsche occasionally calls attention to it. These occasions, in which we hear of the silence, provide the means to understand it. This is the first occasion: “… [the “free spirit”] had listened to me up to then and could not endure to hear my silence. For me there is at this point much to be silent about”(GM I:9). This passage concludes Nietzsche’s comment on the “free spirit” who finds, in the defeat of the masters, the “redemption” of humankind. The silence at issue here is thus one that became unendurable through the account of the destruction of noble ideals. Both the free spirit and Nietzsche recognize the silence: although it is only unendurable for the former, it is apparently abundant for Nietzsche. What they both recognize is missing is some assessment or evaluation of the process. The “free spirit” is willing to follow Nietzsche in identifying “blood-poisoning” as the cause of the masters’ downfall, but wants Nietzsche to concur that the process has generally been good, that “we, too, love the poison.” Nietzsche refuses to concur, or indeed to say anything at all. But he does acknowledge, by acknowledging his silence and yet refusing to respond, that his account lacks an assessment of events and is thus profoundly incomplete.

This reading – that the genealogical account is lacking, and that what it lacks is an assessment of events – is amplified and confirmed when the silence completely breaks down. The final section of GM II begins, “But what am I saying? Enough! Enough! At this point only one things befits me: to be silent”(GM II:25). This suggests that there is a constraint on Nietzsche’s discussion, but that it had been lifted in the previous section. That previous section,
II:24, begins, “I conclude with three question marks, one sees plainly. ‘Is an ideal actually being erected, or is one being knocked down?’ so I may perhaps be asked”(GM II:24). “Conclude” indicates that II:24 marks a break from the previous discussion, so the breaking of the silence should coincide with it. And it consists of a series of questions. I cannot determine which the three privileged ones are, but the first one concerns ideals and what Nietzsche’s ultimate aim is. This seems to be the concern of the section as a whole, and what distinguishes it from the main genealogical account. The central issue here is to difference between the values that we as “modern persons” hold and the values that we might “attempt” or “hope” or even “demand” to hold. What the genealogical account thus lacks is a consideration of goals, and in particular goals about what to care about and what, thereby, to become.

This breaking of silence suggests what, by contrast, the main standpoint of genealogy is. The main standpoint of genealogy purports to be independent of all ends and value judgments. As the passage from Ecce Homo suggested, genealogy is offered as a disinterested, or as it were scientific, inquiry, that neglects considerations of aims or goals in favor of a greater objectivity. It presents the actual causal history of morality by assuming a non-value-laden standpoint. But as Nietzsche abundantly calls attention to, this standpoint is not his own.

Here one may concede that the standpoint of genealogy is not Nietzsche’s own and nevertheless argue that this is still not enough to establish irony. One may argue, that is, that Nietzsche only omits certain details in his main presentation. But the omission of details, especially if those details are value judgments on the causal elements, does not imply that Nietzsche’s assertions should be treated ironically. These assertions are perfectly genuine, even if they do lack the extraneous considerations of what to think of them (or what Nietzsche thinks of them).
The argument from omission is not compelling, however, and a consideration of Nietzsche’s digressions in the *Genealogy of Morals* will show why. This is the second set of textual evidence: Nietzsche writes in multiple *voices*, and in particular distinguishes between his own and that of the genealogical narrator. Nietzsche departs from the main genealogical accounts and speaks in his own voice, and when he does so what he says does not merely *supplement* the causal accounts, but actually stands *in competition* with them. Nietzsche, furthermore, offers the basis for an understanding of why he must compete with his own discourse. Nietzsche contests the very possibility of a genuinely disinterested standpoint, and therefore the idea that one can neatly divide the reporting of events from value judgments about those events. The argument from omission, which relies on such a division, is thus not available.

The main account or accounts of the genealogy offer a naturalistic, or loosely scientific, account of what Nietzsche calls “anti-natural” (*GM* I:16, III:12, *inter alia*) phenomena: illness supplanting strength in the highest values and the moralization of guilt, in particular. These accounts explain what, according to Nietzsche, should be puzzling to us by using causal terms appropriated from biology, physiology, psychology, and just about any discipline that Nietzsche can think of. The “ascetic ideal,” for example, is to be understood in terms of the “systematization of all means for producing orgies of feeling” (*GM* III:22), which is itself driven by a pathological need.

Nietzsche often digresses from the naturalistic causal accounts, however. We can discern this not just by staying attentive to the content of the digressions, but because Nietzsche announces these digressions, most plainly after the fact. Here are five of the *post facto* declarations, and the beginning of a digression that is declared by the use of square brackets:

* (GM I:13) But let us come back …
* (GM II.8) To resume the course of our investigation …
If one uses these declarations as guideposts, what one finds, especially in the later digressions, are attacks on the apparent method of the main genealogical accounts. So Nietzsche criticizes the method that embraces the “mechanistic senselessness of all happenings” (GM II:12), refers to disinterested contemplation as a “incomprehensible absurdity” (GM III:12), calls himself the “severest opponent of materialism” (GM III:16), and insists that his speaking crudely in the Genealogy “does not also express the wish to be heard crudely or understood crudely” (GM III:16). The announced digressions contain qualified repudiations of the main account’s naturalism of causal law.

And the opposition to the main account is not merely formal and general, but substantial as well. For example, the discussion of the contest between the “argument against existence” and “the trick which [life] has always known how to play, that of justifying itself” (GM II:7) seems to present an issue which is not only omitted from a scientific standpoint, but which could not arise at all from a scientific standpoint. A longer excerpt from a digression reveals still more direct competition with the main account:

But from time to time indulge me – assuming there are heavenly goddesses in the realm beyond good and evil – allow me just one glimpse of something perfect, fully achieved, happy, powerful, triumphant, something that can still provoke fear! A person who justifies humanity, a complementary and redeeming lucky strike of humanity for the sake of which one may retain belief in humanity. (GM I:12)

Some of the terms here – “power,” “fear,” possibly even “happiness” – could be explained naturalistically. But “divine goddesses” cannot be; and, more importantly, this passage presents a process that is governed by a telos and luck, and not by mechanical causes. The process, furthermore, offers belief in as opposed to belief that, and even holds out the possibility of
justification, redemption and a “for the sake of,” none of which are naturalistic notions, at least not according to the naturalism of the main narrative voice. And since this process emerges from an explanation of “good and evil,” it covers the same territory as the main account, but as a rival, not as a supplement.

The departures from the main account also indicate why Nietzsche would compete with himself in the explanation of anti-natural phenomena. “Strictly speaking,” Nietzsche says, “there is no such thing as ‘presuppositionless’ science”(GM III:24). This, by itself, indicates the incompleteness of the main account: insofar as it purports to be value-free, it relies on a standpoint that it neglects to articulate, let alone provide a defense for. This also undermines the argument from omission. The argument from omission relies on the possibility of separating an account of events into what objectively happened and what judgments to make about what happened. But that is just what Nietzsche is denying: even the scientific account incorporates judgments about what and how to think about events. The metaphor that Nietzsche uses to convey his position is, of course, “perspective seeing”(GM II:12), and it is in terms of this metaphor that Nietzsche offers his redefinition of objectivity:

… the capacity to have one’s Pro and Con in control and to install and uninstall them, so that one knows how to employ a diversity of perspectives and affect-interpretations for knowledge. (GM III:12)

This, I think, explains why Nietzsche competes with himself. There is no possibility of a single, conclusive account, and the best that one can do is to offer multiple accounts. And the other accounts must, unlike the main genealogical account, offer considerations on “one’s Pro and Con”: even causal explanations incorporate a standpoint on ultimate ends.

This also, I think, forces the conclusion that the Genealogy is ironic. In no way does the main account, at the least, adequately represent Nietzsche’s view about anything. Nietzsche did
not merely omit extraneous value judgments from the causal account, but in providing the causal account articulated a standpoint different from his own.

III. “Wir Erkennenden”

To reinforce my reading of irony in the Genealogy of Morals, I should explain why it is there. This is not strictly necessary – and indeed, my reading of irony is independent of whether or not this explanation is true – but it perhaps helps the credibility of my account: otherwise it might seem odd that Nietzsche devoted so much effort to developing a causal account that he did not genuinely assert. I argue that Nietzsche’s approach in the Genealogy involves avoiding a perspectival problem. This problem, the existence of which I will not argue for here, is that, according to Nietzsche, any theoretical claim manifests a value commitment or particular orientation to the world that cannot itself be justified theoretically; any explanatory claim is therefore problematic.30 Nietzsche does not try to solve this problem by separately defending his perspective or orientation. On the contrary, what he does is offer an account that is ironically self-destructive. That is, what Nietzsche does is offer an account from a perspective, not his own, that (a) explains its own perspective and (b) shows its own perspective, and therefore itself, to be faulty. The strategy is to avoid the perspectival problem by showing that a particular perspective is in fact self-destructive: it can be shown to be defective even from the inside.

My first contention is that if the aim of the genealogical account is not accurately to report the causal factors in the genesis of morality, then it must be something else. The irony must serve some purpose. This is what Nietzsche declares on that matter:

Whoever begins at this point … to reflect, to consider further, that person will not soon come to the end of it – reason enough for me to come to an end, provided that it has long since been sufficiently clear what I want, what I want with such a dangerous slogan as the one written on the cover [Leib] of my last book: “Beyond Good and Evil.” (GM I:17)
The suggestion is that by working through the irony one arrives at some goal beyond it. Since this goal or aim is “sufficiently clear,” I take it to be nothing other than what is said, namely, moving “beyond good and evil.” The purpose of the irony must be to lead somewhere beyond good and evil.

Here is how it works. Genealogy offers, from a scientific standpoint, a self-destruction of the scientific standpoint. If Nietzsche’s claims about perspective-seeing are true, criticism from any other standpoint would be ineffective: it would have to implicate its own limitedness in revealing the limitations of the scientific standpoint. So what Nietzsche does is adopt the scientific standpoint, not to affirm it, but to show where its thorough adoption leads. Its adoption leads to taking itself as an object and finding itself defective. First, the scientific enterprise of the genealogy intersects with the value-laden one, since they both end up with the basic problem of preserving the will. This gives the scientific standpoint the occasion to consider itself as part of the history that it is recounting. The scientific standpoint then reveals itself as a faith, contrary to its own self-understanding. The scientific standpoint of the genealogical account then turns against itself in the realization that it is a causal factor in the illness that it has identified, the self-contempt that arises from a lack of ideals.

The main genealogical account leads to the point where the ascetic ideal has, by shattering the nervous system, caused illness. This provokes reflection on why the illness is so enduring: why it is that nothing more salutary has replaced the ascetic ideal. The standpoint from which this reflection is undertaken, although it concerns health, is still the scientific one. Nietzsche identifies this standpoint when he says, in one of the only unequivocal references back to the Preface, “We ‘knowing ones’ positively mistrust believers of all kinds”(GM III:24); to be knowing in this way is to challenge and supplant mere “belief” with scientific explanation. From
this standpoint, the reflection on the durability of illness is a search for the causal factors that sustain it. And what the causal inquiry digs out here is that the “scientific conscience” is itself an “abyss”\(^{(GM \ III:23)}\):

> Science today has absolutely no belief in itself, not to mention [geschweige] an ideal above it – and where it remains passion, love, ardor, and suffering at all, it is not the opposite of this ascetic ideal but rather the newest and noblest form of it. \(^{(GM \ III:23)}\)

When science sets itself within the scope of its inquiry, it turns out to be one of two things. Either it is itself a kind of faith, and thus the most advanced form of the very problem that it had identified, or, even worse, it is what remains when the illness has run its full course: nothing. It is a kind of commitment that refuses its own justification, that denies its “right to exist”\(^{(GM \ III:24)}\).

The main account of the genealogy thus addresses itself, and diagnoses itself as part of the same condition that it had been investigating. Science rests on the same physiological basis as the ascetic ideal, and indeed aggravates the condition that generated it. Thus the prediction of the account is that the scientific standpoint of the genealogy, as the latest form of Christian truthfulness, “at the ends draws its strongest inference, its inference against itself”\(^{(GM \ III:27)}\).

The story behind the story of the genealogy is one of a standpoint coming to take itself as an object and turning against itself; it thus does not matter whether or not that standpoint is genuinely affirmed. As Nietzsche writes in the second *Untimely Meditation*, “History considered as pure science, having become sovereign, would be a kind of conclusion of life and final reckoning for humanity”\(^{31}\); ironic genealogy thus re-enacts this dispassionate passion without actually killing itself.

**IV. Implications**
In this section I shall examine the implications of my reading of Nietzsche’s irony in On the Genealogy of Morals. I shall do so through a consideration of how the irony would sit with two recent interpretations of the Genealogy, those of David Owen and Christopher Janaway. I shall abstract somewhat from the details of their presentations, in part because I wish to make a set of general points about the implications of irony, rather than interpretation-specific ones, and in part because I could not begin anything like a comprehensive evaluation of these interpretations here. Instead, I wish merely to use these examples to illustrate points about primacy of purpose and answerability to evidence. What I hope to show is that one and only one of the interpretations, that of David Owen, is compatible with my ironic reading. This conclusion is, I think, surprising, and thus supports a further point: although the significance of an ironic reading is difficult to negotiate, such a reading nevertheless forces hermeneutic choices.

David Owen begins his study of the Genealogy with this description of the work:

“Nietzsche takes up the task of offering reasons to engage in a re-evaluation of our values.”

This description – and this is by no means to dispute with Owen – is far from obvious. One might see Nietzsche’s task as explanatory rather than rational and historical rather than evaluative. Owen of course does not deny the presence of the explanatory account; in fact, he offers a rich account of the explanatory project and its naturalistic commitments. What I presume justifies the description in terms of re-evaluative reasons is that the explanatory account is subordinate to the main project, of provoking a change in ethical orientation. So on one hand, the genealogical account must be “compatible with the best Wissenschaft” and manifest a “commitment to truthfulness.” But, on the other hand, perhaps because “our epistemic perspective on the world is governed by a moral perspective on the world,” the theoretical component of the genealogical enterprise can only proceed in support of re-evaluation. That is,
it is not merely that the theoretical project is “directed towards practical ends,” but, because of the force of affective dispositions even in the acknowledgement of truth, the theoretical project is inert or impossible without us having been freed “from the grip of morality.”

Christopher Janaway, in *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, declares his intent “to transmit something of the richness and reward to be found in reading Nietzsche’s texts themselves.” I do not dispute his success with that aim, but my interest here will be narrower. More germane here is that Janaway’s approach seems, on its face, to bear some affinities with my ironic reading. Janaway understands the *Genealogy* as attempting a causal explanation of moral values in terms of psychological states. This explanatory task itself requires affective engagement and thereby initiates a therapeutic process. Such an enterprise seems to incorporate some elements of the Rousseauian mode. For example, what I identified as the “speculative” element in Rousseau’s approach might be compared to what Janaway writes about historical explanation. Nietzsche’s historical account, writes Janaway, does not directly adduce “specific datable human beings, but rather human beings conceived in generic fashion by a kind of projective reconstruction of how a certain psychological type would act and feel in a certain dynamic of power-relations and cultural inheritances.” The historical account seems to be offered in the service of, or at least in connection with, an evaluative element, too. Janaway writes, for example, that one of Nietzsche’s “two large questions” about morality is, “Are these beliefs and attachments good, advantageous, or healthy for human beings?” As one might expect in an ironic reading, furthermore, rhetorical elements are integral to the philosophical content of the work. Janaway even mentions, although mostly in passing, “ironic deceptions” and “the kind of irony that deliberately misleads the reader.”
One dimension of analysis I would like to bring to bear on these readings is that of *primacy of purpose*. David Owen makes clear that the fundamental task of genealogy has three components: “the need to loosen the grip on his audience of the moral perspective to which they are subject so that they can take it as an object of reflection and assessment; the need to provide arguments whose reasons can be acknowledged as such by those subject to the moral perspective … and the need to mobilize the existing affective dispositions of his audience in the service of a goal.”

The fundamental task of the *Genealogy* – the one upon which its success rests – is effecting a change in the ethical orientation of his audience. Nothing in the description of this task inherently requires providing an explanatory account that is both accurate and expressive of Nietzsche’s own perspective. Asserting a true account could indeed serve the ends of re-evaluation. Another sort of account might prove equally effective, however: for Nietzsche to convince his audience that they are lying to themselves does not require him to have the truth nor even to be able to extricate himself from his audience’s decadent perspective. Here we might compare Rousseau’s account of inequality. The purpose of the account was not so much to explain inequality in terms of its *Entstehungsgeschichte*, although it purports to do so. The primary purpose, rather, is to orient us toward a picture of human nature and psychology by employing that picture in the causal history. Strangely enough, the *explanans* turns out to be primary: what happens to be explained is subordinated to changing our evaluative relationship to ourselves. Owen, similarly, offers an explanatory account not for the sake of explanation, but because in *offering* the explanatory account an immoralist army of reasons and affects is mobilized. Although these two things are in fact inseparable, explaining rather than the explanation is critical.
The other dimension of analysis is that of *answerability to evidence*. Rousseau has the more straightforward position here. Rousseau was committed to offering the most plausible, reasonable explanation; verisimilitude was a demand for him because his account would not be effective otherwise. At the same time, however, Rousseau offers his account as immune to empirical challenge. In other words, it ultimately does not matter whether he got it right. A thought-experiment illustrates this. Imagine that we discovered that the history of culture and morality had been in fact so profoundly affected by space aliens that no causal history could neglect their contributions. They would periodically intervene in human lives – appearing to Saul on the road to Damascus, whispering “free will” into Augustine’s ears, occasionally kidnapping people and replacing them with genetically-modified humans, putting psychoactive agents in our malted beverages, and so on. Rousseau’s appropriate response to the new availability of this information would have to be: it does not matter for an understanding of what the meaning of inequality now is or for what that reveals about us. The new evidence need not be considered because the purpose of the explanatory account was never to incorporate the most accurate information. Another way of putting this is that it is impossible to conceive of any new evidence that would compel Rousseau to change his mind about inequality. Owen is not as clear as Rousseau on this matter. But I take this to be the upshot of Owen’s claims about the “non-reductive” character of Nietzsche’s naturalism and its mere “compatibility” with the best *Wissenschaft*: the explanatory account is not answerable to new evidence because it is not inferred from a body of evidence. The explanatory account, rather, works in an unexpected way. It starts from a picture of agency and succeeds by forcing a kind of self-recognition. Owen accordingly switches to claiming that genealogy must be “true to” the object and purpose of inquiry rather than claiming simply that the account is true.
We can consider Janaway’s reading along the same two dimensions. With respect to primacy of purpose, Janaway seems to share a feature of the ironic approach when he writes that the causal account is “instrumental towards” the “critique or revaluation of values that Nietzsche hopes will take place.” That is, it would seem that the causal account is not affirmed for its own sake, but for the sake of an evaluative stance. Janaway’s account does not offer an evaluative stance so much as occupy and take as object an evaluative stance, however. For example, Janaway writes that part of the therapeutic process is “to overcome the need to hold the evaluative attitudes one has developed.” This, I take it, means that the kind of explanation forthcoming will not be of why particular attitudes are good or bad, but rather of how transformation away from distinctively moral attitudes is to be effected; the enterprise seems to be one of descriptive rather than normative ethics. This is much less close to Rousseau than to Marx, who offered a polemical story about transformation from one evaluative stance to a different, otherwise unanticipated one. And this approach leaves little room for irony. Since accounting for the transformative or revaluative process is all there is, nothing would be left if any distance were taken from its unqualified affirmation.

On the dimension of answerability to evidence, Janaway’s reading also shows deeply non-ironic features. It is not clear how Janaway’s Nietzsche would respond to my thought-experiment, since much of it could be incorporated as background or incidental information into an account of generic psychological states. I am indeed unsure what would count as counter-evidence, but I am nevertheless confident that Janaway’s Nietzsche is answerable for features of the causal account. Janaway writes, “Unless Nietzsche can conceive of himself as uncovering truths, he cannot revalue the values of morality.” There is some ambiguity here: Nietzsche’s personal conceivability conditions might be different from actually uncovering truths. But I take
Janaway’s point to be the straightforward one, that the practical task of revaluation depends on his asserting the truth of the causal account. This in turns demands explanation, since it is otherwise unclear how effecting a modification in affects would require a true account of their origin. Since, for example, false explanations and blunt instruments can also modify affects, then it would seem as if a diversity of means other than asserted, true explanations would serve.

I take this as Janaway’s answer: “… Nietzsche enables the reader to locate the target for revaluation, the morality which comprises a complex of attitudes of his or her own, central to which are affective inclinations or aversions.” The argument, that is, is that one cannot so much as “locate” morality – either understand what it is or find it in oneself – without a true genetic account. And locating morality is presumably a condition for revaluing it. My purpose here is not to dispute the plausibility of this view, even though, if there is a need for truth, then being able to discuss morality entails that we in fact already have a true causal account. My purpose here is merely to point out that this view cannot be reconciled with an ironic reading. Note that this leaves untouched a broader point about truth that Janaway makes. An ironic reading is compatible with Nietzsche advancing “would-be truths,” “candidates for truth,” and “hypotheses”; irony is indeed parasitic on truth-seeking discourse, only that never resolves itself into assertion. Janaway’s reading thus departs from the ironic one not when he insists that Nietzsche advances genealogical hypotheses as would-be truths, but he claims that Nietzsche has a decisive commitment to these would-be truths, and that they must in fact be true for Nietzsche’s enterprise to work.

V. Conclusion
Nietzsche offers his genealogical account, on my reading, not to endorse it but to depict its self-destruction. We know this because he tells us that he is going to do so, and he does so. We need not, accordingly, read the *Genealogy* as the attempt to offer a definitive explanation of the origin of morality.

This has two particular consequences for Nietzsche interpretation. One is that we need not worry about whether the *Genealogy* recounts an actual course of events. The presentation does not depend on the ultimate accuracy of the genealogical account; it depends, perhaps, on the conditional that if scientific knowingness took itself as an object, then it would find fault with itself. More generally, this indicates that Nietzsche’s possible modes of truthfulness are more diverse and complex than a choice between literal truth and lying would allow for. Nietzsche’s relationship to the truth of his accounts, their explanatory cogency, and their openness to evidence might not be a straightforward up or down. The other consequence for Nietzsche interpretation is that it is problematic to identify Nietzsche’s theory of human nature, of moral agency, or of anything else within the genealogical account, since Nietzsche is not committed to holding it.

This reading coheres well with an understanding of the general genealogical enterprise as constituting a form of internal critique. Indeed, this is my own broader position on genealogy. But, unfortunately, what I have been arguing can offer only limited support to such a reading. As I have explained the presence of irony, it results from Nietzsche’s evasion of a problem: that there is no perspective-free standpoint from which to put forward an account of morality. The ironic solution is to argue from a standpoint that one is not genuinely committed to. The most that my reading of the performance of genealogy can support, then, is a position on what a particular standpoint advocates. This supports an internal critique reading, in that what seems to
be advocated is a form of self-criticism. But what is lacking without an account of genealogical method is an explanation of why a self-critical standpoint should be adopted and what would follow from it. For example, Daniel Conway argues that Nietzsche adopts a form of naturalism to show “the internal incoherence of foundationalism.” Nothing that I have said, however, supports the idea either that Nietzsche is in any way committed to naturalism, or that its self-criticism would amount to incoherence. My account of the performance of genealogy could certainly be supplemented by an argument that established those two points. Indeed, that may be just what Conway and others have accomplished. But it seems to me that one could also argue, on separate grounds, that the purpose of irony in the Genealogy is to recruit adherents to the foundationalist standpoint through a novel form of sarcastic wit. My account here justifies neither position, but claims that neither set of arguments is adequately supported without attention to Nietzsche’s irony.

I close with two qualifications. One is that Nietzsche evinces hostility not to the scientific standpoint per se, but to science as a “genuine philosophy of reality” (GM III:23) that holds a controlling influence on how we consider our ethical destiny. Science, and indeed nature, cannot solve what David Owen, for example, calls the “problem of authority.” Second, we are not constrained to attribute none of the genealogical elements to Nietzsche. My claims concern the genealogy taken as a whole, and a curious feature of narratives is that their truth is not a function of the truth of the individual components. So there is plenty of room to identify a theory of the ascetic ideal, ressentiment, or even human nature. But, insofar as a reading makes use of the Genealogy for evidence, it must be supported by an account of Nietzsche’s broader philosophical aims.
Although generally neglected, the issue is not universally neglected. See, for example, Eric Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, and Henry Staten, *Nietzsche’s Voice*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1990. There are, of course, many other works which attend specifically to the rhetorical operations of Nietzsche’s texts, but, strangely, few of these pay much attention to the *Genealogy*. Gary Shapiro’s exemplary *Nietzschean Narratives*, for example (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), only refers to the *Genealogy* twice (pp. 88 and 139f). This is by no means a criticism of Shapiro, but for some reason less attention has been given to the rhetoric of Nietzsche’s most famous non-fiction narrative.


Conway’s “internal critique” reading bears another similarity to this one: he claims that genealogy has an “enabling” function that distinct from the critique itself. Insofar as any ironic claim has a function other than asserting the claim, my ironic reading takes a similar position. But since my reading primarily concerns the status of the claims in the *Genealogy*, and not the status of any critique, I cannot argue, as Conway does, that genealogy incorporates a “naturalistic reduction of morality” that nevertheless does not determine morality’s normative status. (See Daniel Conway, “Genealogy and Critical Method,” in R. Schacht ed., *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1994, p. 324, 321.) So our readings are not directly in competition, in that my concern here would be how to take such an incorporation, whereas Conway is primarily concerned with what follows from it.


Of course, it is possible to develop a reading of Hegel along these lines; one possible example is Michael Forster, *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomology of Spirit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.


15 Hume, of course, does have a story to tell – for example in Book III part iii of the *Treatise on Human Nature* – of how humanity developed and converged upon a common moral standpoint. Whether or not this counts as a philosophy of history does not, I think, matter for present purposes.
19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in G. Colli and M. Montinari eds., *Kritische Studienausgabe*, New York de Gruyter, 1988, volume 5, Preface, section 6. All future references to this text will be given parenthetically in the text, by part and section number, following the abbreviation “GM”. Translation is mine and emphasis is original unless noted.
20 If those concerning the Christian God are included, there seem to be genetic accounts of the divine at A 15ff, A 25, and A 51.
23 The word “Hanswurst” is typically translated simply as “buffoon,” and indeed the word often has a generic meaning. I leave Nietzsche’s “Hanswurst” as such, however, because Nietzsche might have had a specific sort of buffoon in mind: Hanswurst was a stock character of folk theater, parallel to Pierrot or Arlecchino. Hanswurst (“Jack Sausage”) was typically a vulgar, gluttonous servant who, although foolish, was often effective in realizing his ends.
The silence starts to break down at **GM I:12**: “At this point I do not suppress a sigh and a last bit of confidence …”

I write “mostly plainly” largely because Nietzsche uses roughly the same language for all the *post facto* declarations, but uses topic-specific and thus variable language for al the *ex ante* ones. The *ex ante* ones are nevertheless not difficult to recognize: see, for example, I:8, I:14, I:17, II:7, II:24, and III:27.

Kaufmann uses parentheses here, but the *KSA* and, for example, the Clark and Swensen translation of *GM* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1998), set off this part of the text with square brackets.


Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 44.


Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 44.


See David Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality*, Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007, p. 131, where the naturalistic commitment is characterized as “providing a psychologically realistic account” with a “naturalistic form.”


Cf. also Janaway on “finding an evaluative space outside morality,” *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 249.  
52 Contrast Janaway’s metaphor of “to kick away the ladder” with an ironic reading: on the former, one has genuinely moved to a higher vantage, and only repudiates the steps that one had formerly committed to. For the metaphor, see Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 237.  
60 See my [redacted for review]  
64 For an exceptionally rich collection of treatments of the *Genealogy*, see Richard Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1994. Unfortunately I cannot here discuss which essays meet the criterion for use of evidence from the *GM* that I adduce below.  
65 I wish to thank [redacted for review]