

Rereading Nietzsche with Philosophical Hermeneutics: “Life” as the “Hermeneutic Situation”

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“The foundations of the new pedagogy. Not historical (*historisch*), but living-into (*hineinleben*). The “godly one-sidedness”.¹”

The relationship between Friedrich Nietzsche and philosophical hermeneutics has been a subject of conversation for several decades now. Many readers of Nietzsche have emphasized his influence on 20th century philosophical hermeneutics and suggested that he be brought into closer contact with contemporary philosophical hermeneutics.² Still others, however, have emphasized important points of divergence between Nietzsche and philosophical hermeneutics.³ In this paper I want to consider the relationship between Nietzsche and philosophical hermeneutics through a different strategy: namely, through an examination of Nietzsche’s *own* commentaries on the field of hermeneutics. Although he uses the term “hermeneutics” very rarely, Nietzsche reflects on the nature and method of interpretation throughout his published and unpublished writings. In his early philological writings, for example, Nietzsche frequently goes beyond the text to reflect on the discipline of philology *meta-critically*: he questions standards assumptions of philological method and raises philosophical questions about the nature of interpretation. In these early writings, the concept of “life” emerges as a concept for the basic reality and context of interpretation. Nietzsche opposes the attempt to interpret ‘objectively’ on the specific grounds that interpretation is an activity of “life,” and therefore an activity in which the interpreter *gives* meaning to the text rather than passively receives it.

The purpose of this paper is to consider Nietzsche’s commentaries on hermeneutics in direct relation to philosophical hermeneutics and the concept of the “hermeneutic situation.” The main thesis I will defend in this paper is that Nietzsche’s use of the concept of “life” to attempt a meta-critical reflection on the discipline of classical philology is much better represented by

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1988). *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA). Colli, Giorgio und Mazzino Montinari, ed. Berlin, DE: de Gruyter, 7, p. 385.

² For example, see Vattimo, Gianni (1986). “Nietzsche and Contemporary Hermeneutics”, in *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, Yovel, Y., ed. Dordrecht, NE: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, p. 58-68; and Babich, Babette (2014). ‘Nietzsche and the Ubiquity of Hermeneutics’, in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*. Malpas, Jeff and Hans-Helmuth Gander, ed. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 85-97.

³ For example, see Grondin, Jean (2010). “Must Nietzsche be Incorporated into Hermeneutics? Some Reasons for a Little Resistance.” *IRIS European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* (April): p. 105-122.

Heidegger, Gadamer, and philosophical hermeneutics than representatives of the standard *Lebensphilosophie* reading. Although Heidegger and Gadamer do not include Nietzsche within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, both motivate the value of a hermeneutic reading of his philosophy by arguing that Nietzsche's concept of "life" must be understood—not biologically—but in terms of "a more original grasp of knowing in its essential unity with life". "Life" is for Nietzsche a concept for the effective reality of interpretation, i.e., our "hermeneutic situation." After first examining some of Nietzsche's commentaries on interpretation and "life", I will turn to analyze Heidegger and Gadamer's readings of Nietzsche and I will suggest that Heidegger and Gadamer recognize in Nietzsche's concept of "life" an ontological reality that is completely foreign to life philosophy: the reality of the hermeneutic situation. At the conclusion of the paper, I will advance from this suggestion to an additional thesis: that despite their positive evaluations of Nietzsche's concept of "life", Heidegger and Gadamer underestimate its value for philosophical hermeneutics insofar as they underestimate the extent to which Nietzsche was aware of its ontological character. Through my analysis of a few of Nietzsche's commentaries on historical being and the relationship that exists between "life" and "death", I will suggest that there is a clear ontological dimension to Nietzsche's reflections on hermeneutics, and that this ontological dimension holds value for contemporary research in philosophical hermeneutics.

Let us begin with Nietzsche's relationship to the field of 19th century hermeneutics. Nietzsche was a well-known figure within the discipline of classical philology at an early age, even before his appointment as professor of philology at the University of Basel in 1869. During the 1860's he studied under some of the most important philologists of the period, including Otto Jahn and Friedrich Ritschl. He developed working relationships with many other important hermeneutic thinkers,⁴ and earned a favorable reputation for his publications on Diogenes

⁴ For example, Hermann Diels had originally hoped to work with Nietzsche on the first edition of the *Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*. For a discussion of this plan, see Babich, Babette (2020). *Nietzsches Antike. Beiträge zur Altphilologie und Musik*. Berlin: Academia, p. 21-22.

Laertius,⁵ Homer,⁶ Hesiod,⁷ and ancient Greek rhythm and meter.⁸ Nietzsche's philological writings during this period suggest his deep understanding of the field of hermeneutics. Unlike many of his later writings, for example, these writings are littered with references to contemporary scholarship, including scholarship in textual criticism.⁹ Additionally, Nietzsche's appreciation of the scientific demands of philology is considerable. In his lectures on the pre-Socratic philosophers, for example, Nietzsche frequently criticizes the way that historians date the births, apexes, and deaths of the pre-Socratic philosophers on the grounds that these chronologies are motivated by the desire to organize pre-Socratic philosophy into a comprehensible line of succession.¹⁰ Such interpretive efforts amount only to anachronistic "backdating", Nietzsche observes, and thus fall short of true scientificity.

While Nietzsche had a practiced understanding of the field of hermeneutics, his philological writings from this period also suggest his interest in reflecting *on* 19th century hermeneutics. During his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel, for example, Nietzsche suggests that philology was witnessing increasing uncertainty about its value and that a formal defense of the discipline had become necessary.¹¹ One would expect someone in Nietzsche's position—a young professor speaking for the first time to his colleagues—to insist on the value of the scientificity of philology at this moment. Yet Nietzsche does precisely the opposite: "Against these enemies, we philologists must always count upon the assistance of artists and

⁵ See Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1967). *Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA)*, Colli, Giorgio and Mazzino Montinari, ed.'s. Berlin, DE: de Gruyter, 11/1: p. 169-190. Nietzsche published three studies on Diogenes Laertius between 1868 and 1870. According to Jonathan Barnes, these studies make up one half of Nietzsche's published philological writings. See Barnes, Jonathan (2014). 'Nietzsche and Diogenes Laertius', in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, Jensen, Anthony K. & Heit, Helmut, eds., London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 115-137. Diogenes' most well-known text—*Lives of the Philosophers*—is by no means a perfect text: it was widely criticized for its inaccuracy during the 18th century, and Nietzsche himself frequently expressed his frustrations with it. Yet Nietzsche saw value in Diogenes' biographical and doxographical account of the earlier Greek philosophers that had not been represented by previous scholars. This is the central subject matter of Nietzsche's philological reflections on it.

⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1994). "Homer und die klassische Philologie," in *Frühe Schriften*, Vol. 5, ed. Carl Koch and Karl Schlechta, Munich: C. H. Beck.

⁷ See Nietzsche, Friedrich (1870). "Der Florentische Traktat über Homer und Hesiod, ihr Geschlecht und ihren Wettkampf," in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*: 528–540

⁸ Brobjer, Thomas (2008). *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁹ As Mansfeld and Runia observe: "[Nietzsche] had become acquainted with the latest developments in New Testament criticism." Mansfeld, Jaap & David T. Runia (1997). *Aëtiana: The Method and Intellectual Context of a Doxographer: The Sources. Volume I*. Brill: p. 116.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich (2006). *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Whitlock, Greg, trans.. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, pp. 41-43, 75, & 94.

¹¹ See Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (2006). *Homer and Classical Philology*, Kennedy, J. M., trans., Levy, Oscar, ed. E-Book: Project Gutenberg, pp. 2.

men of artistic minds; for they alone can judge how the sword of barbarism sweeps over the head of every one who loses sight of the unutterable simplicity and noble dignity of the Hellene.”¹² Nietzsche argues in this lecture that a purely scientific representation of antiquity is insufficient because it lacks the creative vision that is required by interpretation, i.e., the capacity to represent something from the past in an original way that captures its singularity but does not reduce its meaning to what is already understood in modernity.¹³ What is important about this lecture for our purposes is that it gives expression to an instinct which will remain fundamental in all of Nietzsche’s subsequent writings: the instinct to reflect *meta-critically* on hermeneutics.¹⁴ Across his philological writings, Nietzsche attempts to think critically *about* philology and methods of philological interpretation. When Nietzsche argues for the insufficiency of a purely scientific representation of antiquity, for example, he is not reversing his position on the scientificity of philology. As Porter observes, Nietzsche is attempting to radicalize the internal assumptions of philology: he is bringing the scientificity of philology forward to the recognition that ‘antiquity’ is by necessity an object fabricated by the philologist themselves.¹⁵ This is the difference between philology and a meta-critical philology: while philology remains foreign to itself and its involvement in the creation of meaning, meta-critical philology attempts a “self-doubting practice.”

Within Nietzsche’s philological writings, the concept of “life” emerges as a concept for the basic reality and context of interpretation. In one instance, Nietzsche writes:

We should learn in the same way that the Greeks learned from their past and their neighbors—for *life*, that is, being highly selective and immediately using all that has been learned as a pole on which one can vault high—and higher than all one’s neighbors. Thus, not in a scholarly way! Anything not fit for life is not true

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 3.

¹³ Nietzsche defends this thesis concerning the state of classical philology through an example: the question of the personality of Homer. As Alexey Zhavoronkov has observed, this example would have seemed especially out of fashion amongst Nietzsche’s audience. While the philological tendency during this period was to interpret the consistency (or inconsistency) of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* without any mention of ‘Homer’, Nietzsche argues that the term ‘Homer’ was never a historical judgment but always an “aesthetic judgment”. The question of the personality of Homer is therefore a question of the aesthetic perspective we choose to attribute to Homeric works. See Zhavoronkov, Alexey (2014). ‘Nietzsche’s Influence on Homeric Scholarship’, in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, Jensen, Anthony K. & Heit, Helmut, eds., London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 139-141.

¹⁴ Here it should be noted that Nietzsche concludes his inaugural lecture with the following proposition: “*philosophia facta est quae philologia fuit*” (“*What was once philology has now been made into philosophy*”). See *ibid*, pp. 10.

¹⁵ See Porter, James I. (2014). “Nietzsche’s Radical Philology”, in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, Jensen, A. K. & H. Heit, eds. London: Bloomsbury, p. 32.

history (*Historie*)... (the scholar) leaves everything dead and mummy-like.¹⁶

In this passage Nietzsche makes a distinction between ancient Greek interpretation (“true history”) and modern hermeneutics (“dead and mummy-like” history). Insofar as the Greeks’ efforts to interpret the past were mediated by a selective taste for only that which serves as a “foothold” for new modes of living and thinking,¹⁷ these efforts stand in clear contrast to modern hermeneutics. Amongst modern interpreters, there is no selective taste concerning what will allow us to live and think differently, and thus no recognition of the fact that interpretation is an activity that can either make “living” or make “dead”.¹⁸ What is most important for us to emphasize here is that Nietzsche’s distinction between ancient Greek and modern hermeneutics rests on the question of whether or not one recognizes “life” as the basic reality and context of interpretation. While the Greeks valued interpretation in such a way that their pursuit of knowledge never became separated from the practical situation of life—i.e., from the reality that interpretation is an activity of life—modern scholars value interpretation in such a way that knowledge is achieved *in spite of* life. The pursuit of a ‘good’ interpretation becomes connected to the suppression of the basic reality of interpretation—interpretations are measured solely by their accuracy and completeness, and interpreters are encouraged to make the past “dead” and “mummy-like”.

Nietzsche’s concept of “life” became increasingly fundamental to his vision for a philology of the future. Let us consider another note from this period:

The foundations of the new pedagogy. Not historical (*historisch*), but living-into (*hineinleben*). The "godly/divine one-sidedness".¹⁹

The word I have translated as “living-into” in this passage is the German *hineinleben*, which could also be translated as “living-within” or “immersion.” The root of the word is *Leben* (“life”), and this is important because Nietzsche means to envision a hermeneutic here which turns reflexively on its own context of interpretation (“life”) in such a way that it can be said to

¹⁶ KSA 7, 19[196], p. 479. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1999). *Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations*, Gray, Richard T., trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 60-61, dated 1872-1873.

¹⁷ KSA 1, p. 806. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1962). *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Cowan, Marianne, trans., New York: Regnery Publishing, pp. 30.

¹⁸ Concerning Nietzsche’s representation of the Greeks, one might think here of Gadamer’s comment that “we understand in a different way, if we understand at all.” See Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2013). *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinscheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 306-310.

¹⁹ KSA 7, p. 385, my translation.

“live-into” its source material. This is a difficult idea, and Nietzsche does not expand upon it. I believe the most effective way to clarify Nietzsche’s point, however, is to relate it to Heidegger and Gadamer’s representations of the “hermeneutic situation.” In *Being and Time* Heidegger describes the “hermeneutical situation” of *Dasein* in terms of the totality of presuppositions that structure our (pre-)understanding of Being.²⁰ To understand the way in which we *are*, Heidegger suggests, we must turn reflexively back onto ourselves and interpret our own hermeneutic situation—that is to say, the various ways in which our situatedness in social and historical circumstances has already led us to determine what we are and what exists for us in a particular way. Gadamer describes the “hermeneutic situation” similarly in *Truth and Method*: our “hermeneutic situation” is the reality of “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), i.e., the reality that “the essence of the historical being that we are” can only be understood in ways that are themselves historically-effected.²¹ For both Heidegger and Gadamer, the hermeneutic situation refers to the basic context of interpretation which must itself be brought into awareness and interpreted in the activity of interpretation. When Nietzsche represents the “new pedagogy” in terms of *hineinleben* (“living-into”), he means to advance the same imperative, although he uses “life” instead of “hermeneutic situation.” To interpret the past, we must recognize that interpretation is an activity of life and attempt to understand *backward* by moving *forward*—that is to say, by *creating* and *legislating* a meaning for the past. In his later writings, Nietzsche frames the activity of interpretation very similarly. In an early preface for *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, he writes:

Interpretation (*Auslegung*), *not* explanation (*Erklärung*). There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is our opinions. The introduction of meaning (*Sinn-hineinlegen*)—in most cases a new interpretation over an old interpretation that has become incomprehensible, that is now itself only a sign.²²

Nietzsche opposes the activity of “interpretation” to “explanation” on the grounds that “explanation” presupposes the existence of dead, unchanging “facts.” Yet he also specifies that

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin (2008). *Being and Time*, Macquarrie, John & Edward Robinson, trans. New York: Harper Perennial, pp. 274.

²¹ Gadamer (2013), p. 311-313. This leads Gadamer to the conclusion: “*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.*”

²² KSA 12, 2 [82], p. 100, my translation with reference to Kaufmann and Hollingdale’s translation. See also Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968). *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York, NY: Vintage Books, pp. 327, dated 1885-1886.

explanations *are* interpretations. Although interpreters believe themselves to be deciphering an unchanging meaning, they are in fact introducing meaning. This is the reality of knowledge as interpretation. As Schrift, Katsafanas, and Babich have observed,²³ comments like these are rooted in a view that Nietzsche appears to have held as early as the 1860's: namely, that *everything is interpretation*. Everything acquires a sense from the activity of living beings, Nietzsche suggests, and accordingly we are born into a world in which there exist only interpretations and interpretations *of* interpretations. Even we ourselves are interpretations: who we are also is determined by the same meaning-giving activity.

This is the point at which Nietzsche's commentaries on hermeneutics reveal an ontological character. Consider a short quotation from 1885:

“Being”—we have no other idea of it than “*living*.”—Therefore how can something dead “be”?²⁴

When we first read this statement, perhaps it seems like Nietzsche is making a reductively biologicistic or psychologicistic claim: namely, that we have no understanding of Being outside of one that is determined by our own biology and psychology. Indeed, this reading was introduced during the early 20th century by life philosophers (*Lebensphilosophen*) such as Spengler, Klages, and Baeumler, and has remained prevalent in Nietzsche scholarship ever since. This is the *Lebensphilosophie* reading of Nietzsche: a reading which suggests that Nietzsche identifies “Being” with “life” because he views all aspects of consciousness (e.g., “Being”) as expressions of the activity of biological, psychological life.²⁵ Spengler, for example, believed that Nietzsche was the first thinker to recognize morality as a symptom of biological life,²⁶ as well as the first thinker to make biological life into the standard for all determinations of value (i.e., “good” and

²³ See Schrift, Alan (1990). *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*. New York: Routledge, p. 180-184; Katsafanas, Paul (2018). “Nietzschean approaches to hermeneutics”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Förster Michael & Kristin Gjesdal, eds. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 158-159; and Babich (2014), p. 85-89;

²⁴ KSA 12, 2[172], p. 153. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich (2019). *Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885-Spring 1886)*, pp. 388.

²⁵ Spengler, Klages, and Baeumler began to read Nietzsche as a *Lebensphilosoph* in accordance with two early 20th century publications by Rickert and Scheler. See Rickert, Heinrich (1999). ‘Lebenswerte und Kulturwerte’, in *Philosophische Aufsätze*. Hrsg Rainer A. Bast. Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck; and Scheler, Max (1913). ‘Versuche einer Philosophie des Lebens’, in *Die Weissen Blätter*, Nr. 3.

²⁶ See Spengler, Oswald (2014a). *Decline of the West, Volume One*, Atkinson, Charles Francis, trans. U.S.A.: CreateSpace Independent, pp. 231. See also *ibid*, p. 73-74, 93-95.

“bad” as synonyms of “healthy” and “sick”).²⁷ Klages, for another, described Nietzsche as the “first (genuine) psychologist”²⁸ and suggested that Nietzsche’s monumental discovery was that spirit or mind (*Geist*) is nothing but a “diseased form” of biological life.²⁹

The *Lebensphilosophie* reading of Nietzsche is still very common today.³⁰ It also has much in its favor: Nietzsche frequently emphasizes in his later writings that “interpretation” is an organic process.³¹ During the 1920’s and 1930’s, however, Heidegger became one of the first thinkers to criticize this reading, describing life philosophy as “a haven for thoughtlessness”³² and the expression ‘*Lebensphilosophie*’ as an expression which says as much as “the botany of plants.”³³ He represents the problem with life philosophy as follows: “What is conspicuous in such a philosophy (and here it is in principle) is that here “life” itself as a kind of Being does not become ontologically a problem.”³⁴ The problem with life philosophy for Heidegger is that life philosophers criticize rationality and spirit as things which are ‘distanced from life’ (*lebensfern*) but ultimately appeal to a concept of “life” which presupposes that life is a reality which is uncomplicated and ‘present-at-hand’, e.g., a biological reality, a psychological reality, a metaphysical reality, etc. “Life” is not recognized as a reality that exists only for our particular mode of existence (*Dasein*), and therefore a reality which becomes accessible only through ontological inquiry.³⁵ During his 1930’s lectures, Heidegger explicitly distinguishes Nietzsche from life philosophy. He acknowledges that “life” is the guiding word (*Leitwort*) of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and that Nietzsche shares in common with life philosophers the attempt to

²⁷ Spengler, Oswald (2014b). *Decline of the West, Volume Two*, Atkinson, Charles Francis, trans. U.S.A: CreateSpace Independent, pp. 8. Spengler distinguishes his own morphological project from Nietzsche’s philosophical project. Yet Spengler is clear to align his morphological project with Nietzsche’s influence at important steps along the way.

²⁸ See Klages, Ludwig (2015). *Cosmogonic Reflections*, Pryce, Joseph D., trans., Paquette, Jonathan and John B. Morgan, ed’s. London, UK: Arktos Media, pp. 118.

²⁹ Klages, Ludwig (2013). ‘Man and Nature’, in *The Biocentric Worldview*, Pryce, Joseph D., trans. London, UK: Arktos Media, pp. 81-82.

³⁰ For example, see Schnädelbach, Herbert (1984). *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 139-141, 149, 157-158; Jones, Donna V. (2010). *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; and Reill, Peter Hanns (2005). *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 201.

³¹ For example: “The will to power interprets (it is a question of interpretation when an organ is constructed): it defines limits, determines degrees, variations of power... interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something. (The organic process constantly presupposes interpretations.)” KSA 12, 2[148], p. 139-140. Translation from Nietzsche (1968), p. 342.

³² See Heidegger, Martin (2003). *Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Second Untimely Meditation*, Haase, Ulrich & Mark Sinclair, trans. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 9.

³³ Heidegger (2008), p. 71-72

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 71-72

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 76.

understand the whole of Being as “life.”³⁶ Yet he suggests that the popular reading of Nietzsche as a life philosopher is “utterly thoughtless”,³⁷ and ultimately the “main obstacle” to our accessing Nietzsche’s philosophy.³⁸ What is missed by this reading of Nietzsche is that Nietzsche’s concept of “life” never entailed a “biological worldview” but rather served to “bring the essence of Western metaphysics to completion on the historical path that is allotted to it.”³⁹ When Nietzsche characterizes Being as “*living*”, Heidegger explains, he is not simply proposing that “life” be identified as the metaphysical “truth” of Being, but rather challenging us to consider that the very attempt to represent the “truth” of Being as a ‘present-at-hand’ reality must necessarily undermine itself. For Nietzsche, the task of understanding the whole of Being as “life” does not mean answering a question, but rather *returning* to a question that has been forgotten: the *ontological* question of Being. Nietzsche’s concept of “life” serves the purpose of undermining Western philosophy’s attempts to flee from the question of Being and forcing us to raise this question again, and accordingly moves in the direction of ontology in a way that is completely foreign to life philosophy.

What is important in Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche is the suggestion that Nietzsche’s concept of “life” entails a fundamental reevaluation of the nature of interpretation. Concerning Nietzsche’s 1874 essay ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life’—an essay that life philosophers tend to read as an attack on historical study—Heidegger explains:

With the publication of the second of his *Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtungen*, ‘Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben’, Nietzsche’s thinking gives the false impression that he is fighting against “science” in favor of so-called life, whereas in truth he is fighting for knowledge in honor of an originally conceived “life” and reflection on “life”... a more original grasp of knowing in its essential unity with life.⁴⁰

Heidegger suggests in this passage that Nietzsche’s 1874 essay was not an attack on historical study but an attempt to reconceive of knowledge in its “essential unity with life”. While life philosophers evaluate the perspective of historical science as ‘distanced from life’ to the extent that it becomes separated from the perspective of biological, psychological reality, Nietzsche’s

³⁶ See Heidegger (2003), pp. 89-90.

³⁷ See Heidegger, Martin (1991b). *Nietzsche, Volumes Three and Four*, Krell, David Farrell, trans. San Francisco, CA: Harper, Vol. 3, pp. 93.

³⁸ Heidegger (1991b), p. 40-41. See also See Heidegger, Martin (1991a). *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, Krell, David Farrell, trans. San Francisco, CA: Harper, Vol. 1, pp. 58.

³⁹ Heidegger (1991b), Vol. 3., pp. 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 94.

starting point is that *all* knowledge is an activity of life. Even biological and psychological knowledge is characterized by a perspectival horizon, and is thus an *expression* of history more than an understanding of it. Given its focus on Nietzsche's "more original grasp of knowing in its essential unity with life", Heidegger's reading suggests the distinct *hermeneutic* value of Nietzsche's concept of "life". Harkening back to his conception of the "hermeneutical situation", Heidegger suggests that Nietzsche viewed the entirety of knowledge as a product of "life" in the sense of our historically-situated situation of interpretation, and that this view led Nietzsche to seek "a more original grasp of knowing in its essential unity with life."⁴¹ For Nietzsche, it is not enough to interpret what has happened in the past scientifically. It is moreover necessary to turn reflexively and interpret the interpretation, i.e., interpret ourselves and our constructions of history as historically effected.

Gadamer similarly highlights the hermeneutic character of Nietzsche's concept of "life." In 'Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century' he characterizes early 20th century life philosophy as a form of Neo-Romanticism, yet makes one important exception: Nietzsche. He writes:

Was not the critique of the dominant Neo-Kantian philosophy that focused on the concepts "life" and "existence" essentially romantic in character?... We could actually embrace this argument if Nietzsche did not stand behind these philosophical movements of our century. He was the great, fateful figure who fundamentally altered the task of the critique of subjective spirit for our century... (Nietzsche's) criticism aims at the final and most radical alienation that comes upon us from out of ourselves—the *alienation of consciousness itself*. Consciousness and self-consciousness do not give unambiguous testimony that what they think they mean is not perhaps a masking or distorting of what is really in them.⁴²

Just as with Heidegger, Gadamer distinguishes Nietzsche from life philosophy on the grounds that he had achieved a more radical revaluation of knowledge. Specifically, Nietzsche recognized that our view of consciousness as a consciousness *of* life is tantamount to the "*the alienation of consciousness*": consciousness conceals from itself that it remains connected to what it is supposedly conscious *of*. Immediately after this passage Gadamer continues:

⁴¹ Elsewhere Heidegger writes of Nietzsche: "(t)o ask about the *essence* of knowledge means knowingly to experience what "really" has happened in the history that we are." See Heidegger (1991b), pp. 20.

⁴² Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2008). *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Linge, David E., trans. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 'The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century (1962)', p. 115-116.

Since Nietzsche, the claim has arisen that it is interpretation, with its legitimate cognitive and interpretive aim, that first grasps the real which extends beyond every subjective meaning... The effects of this idea are beginning to be felt only in our own century. If in earlier times interpretation aimed at nothing more than the explication of the author's true meaning (and I have reasons for believing that this concept was always too narrow), it is now explicitly the case that interpretation is expected to go behind the subjectivity of the act of meaning. It is a question of learning to get behind the surface of what is meant.⁴³

Gadamer shares in common with Heidegger the view that Nietzsche's appeals to "life" and "will to power" were never appeals to a single present-at-hand reality (e.g., biological life, psychological life), but rather attempts to turn reflexively back on the reality of interpretation. For Nietzsche it is not enough to recognize that interpretation involves the introduction of meaning: it is moreover necessary to turn reflexively on the activity of interpretation itself and weigh the value of *this* interpretation over other possible interpretations. Interpretation must be brought forward to a critical awareness of our "hermeneutic situation".

I believe Heidegger and Gadamer's readings of Nietzsche are much more successful than the *Lebensphilosophie* reading insofar as they better represent Nietzsche's efforts to achieve "a more original grasp of knowing in its essential unity with life". While the *Lebensphilosophie* reading approaches Nietzsche's concept of "life" as a reductively biologicistic or psychologistic concept, and thus a concept that is understood to the extent that an interpreter suppresses the biological and psychological limitations of understanding, Heidegger and Gadamer recognize the connection between Nietzsche's concept of "life" and his meta-critical reflections on 19th century hermeneutics. For Heidegger and Gadamer, Nietzsche's concept of "life" is not a biological concept but a meta-critical concept of the effective reality of interpretation, or even better, a concept of our "hermeneutic situation." One objection that could be raised at this point is that the *Lebensphilosophie* reading is more capable of representing the standard by which Nietzsche distinguishes 'good' interpretations from 'bad' ones. When Nietzsche celebrates the Greeks for using knowledge "as a pole on which one can vault high", for example, his suggestion appears to be that one's biological and psychological health is the primary determinant for a 'good' interpretation. Yet this reading ignores Nietzsche's commitment to meta-critical reflection, that is to say, his commitment to reflecting critically on interpretations (including biological and psychological interpretations) by radicalizing their internal assumptions. As Schacht and Schrift

⁴³ *Ibid*, 'The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century (1962)', p. 115-117.

have observed, Nietzsche adjudicates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ interpretations—not by reducing the activity of interpretation to a biological phenomenon—but by embracing an “interpretive pluralism” in which the proliferation of new interpretations allows us to better determine which interpretations help us understand the meaning of a given text and which do not.⁴⁴ For Nietzsche, ‘good’ interpretations only come into view when we reflect critically *on* the activity of interpretation: this is how we liberate new ways of access to the “living” meaning of a text (rather than making it “dead” and “mummy-like”).

To this point I have argued that Heidegger and Gadamer grasp the motivations behind Nietzsche’s commentaries on hermeneutics better than life philosophers insofar as they grasp his concept of “life”—not as a biological concept—but as a concept of our “hermeneutic situation”. At this point it must be acknowledged, however, that Heidegger believed Nietzsche ultimately failed to arrive at an ontological inquiry. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s concepts of the “will to power” and the “eternal return” were sufficient to “bring the essence of Western metaphysics to completion on the historical path that is allotted to it”, but *not* sufficient to lead a path beyond metaphysics to fundamental ontology.⁴⁵ Nietzsche demonstrates the failure of Western metaphysics but only by attempting a “reversal” of its attempt to represent the truth of Being, and thereby by preserving this position as it is.⁴⁶ The final word of Heidegger’s reading, then, is that Nietzsche’s concept of “life” is not adequately ontological in the way that is required for “hermeneutic ontology”. It still remains for us to approach “life” as an ontological problem.⁴⁷

Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche as a metaphysical thinker forces us to ask: how far can Nietzsche’s concept of “life” really take us in the direction of philosophical hermeneutics? Should we read Nietzsche as a hermeneutic philosopher?—or should we distance Nietzsche from all “hermeneutic ontology”? Obviously I cannot resolve this question here. However I would like to conclude by providing some evidence to suggest that Nietzsche anticipated the ontological dimensions of the “hermeneutic situation” much more than Heidegger and Gadamer recognized.

⁴⁴ See Schacht, Richard (1984). "Nietzsche on Philosophy, Interpretation and Truth." *Nous* 18: p. 81-82; and Schrift (1990), pp. 188-189.

⁴⁵ See Heidegger (1991b), Vol. 3, pp. 6-8.

⁴⁶ Heidegger (1991b), Vol. 3, pp. 112-113 & Vol. 4, pp. 148-149. Although it should be kept in mind here that Heidegger believes that Nietzsche successfully brings Western metaphysics to completion. See *ibid*, pp. 18.

⁴⁷ Gadamer appears to come to the same conclusion: in different instances he describes Nietzsche’s *Lebensbegriff* as a concept of the “irrationality of life” and a variation of “the metaphysics of the will.” See Gadamer (2008), ‘Heidegger’s Later Philosophy’ (1960), p. 213-214; and Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1985). ‘Dilthey und Ortega: Philosophie des Lebens’, in *Gesammelte Werke Band IV*. Tübingen, DE: J.C.B. Mohr, pp. 440-441.

Alongside Nietzsche's emphases that interpretation is an activity of life, we find also the emphasis that the activity of life is something in need of a more fundamental form of interpretation. In *Human All Too Human*, for example, Nietzsche observes that "something that is itself becoming cannot reflect itself as fixed and enduring, as any specific "thing".⁴⁸ The picture that results from this comment is a *negative ontology* of the kind suggested by Fink and Babich⁴⁹: an ontology according to which there are no "things" at all, and even words such as "life" and "becoming" lack a referent beyond our own imaginations. Nietzsche frequently describes "life" in ways that suggest its 'non-being', i.e., its status as something other than a 'thing'.⁵⁰ Most important for our purposes are his descriptions of "life" as the reality of historical being. In *Human All Too Human* he writes: "Immediate self-observation is far from sufficient for getting to know ourselves: we need history, for the past flows on, through us, in a hundred waves; indeed, we are ourselves nothing except what we experience at every moment of this onward flow."⁵¹ Just as Gadamer equates the task of becoming conscious of our "hermeneutic situation" with the task of becoming conscious of our being affected by history, Nietzsche equates the task of understanding "life" here with the task of understanding ourselves *as* history, i.e., the continual "flow" of the past in its forward movement. "Life" is not an existing thing for Nietzsche, but a surface phenomenon for the way Being is for us: namely, historical being or historicity.⁵² There are no "things"—there is only history in the sense of the co-implication of

⁴⁸ KSA 2, p. 387. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich (2013). *Human, All Too Human II*. Trans. Gary Handwerk. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 18.

⁴⁹ See Fink, Eugen (1960). *Nietzsches Philosophie*. W. Kohlhammer GmbH: Stuttgart; and Babich, Babette (2020b). „Nietzsches negative Ontologie“ in *Handbuch Ontologie*, Jan Urbich and Jörg Zimmer, eds. Frankfurt am Main: Metzler, S. 155-164.

⁵⁰ In the *Gay Science*, for example, he observes that "(t)he living is only a type of what is dead, and a very rare type." See KSA 3, p. 468. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974). *Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York, NY: Vintage Books, p. 167. Of course, we must be careful not to assume that Nietzsche's point here is a reductively materialist one. After all, we must not forget that Nietzsche also raises the question, "how can something dead 'be'?" Nietzsche's view lies *between* these two observations: to the same extent that life does not exist because it is merely a kind of what is dead, death does not exist because it is merely a form of what is living. For Nietzsche, 'non-being' is precisely the ontological character of life and death (equally).

⁵¹ KSA 2, p 477. Translation from Nietzsche (2013), p. 95.

⁵² Nietzsche reflects on the nature of temporal and historical being in all of his writings, but another instance worth our attention takes place in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. After having previously argued that the history of a 'thing' is nothing but "a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations", he gestures toward a historical reality which exists beneath the history of "thing(s)" when he observes that a "desire to get right away from all illusion, change, growth, death, wishing, and even desiring" implies a "will opposed to life". See KSA 5, p. 412. Translation from Nietzsche (2014), p. 349. Nietzsche indicates here, again, that the reality of life is not the reality of a "thing" but the reality of history, i.e., the reality of "illusion, change, growth, death, wishing, and even desiring."

present, past, and future. The past flows *through* us, and interpretation is merely the way in which historical being unfolds and develops.

Of course, Heidegger believed that Nietzsche's understanding of historical being was also rooted in a metaphysical worldview—namely, Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return. This deserves further discussion, even considering the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return. Yet as a way of concluding this paper, I want to suggest that Nietzsche's understanding of historical being led him to represent the activity of interpretation in ways that prefigure philosophical hermeneutics and the concept of the "hermeneutic situation". In the second half of his 1874 essay, Nietzsche turns his attention from historical study (*Historie*) to the nature of history itself (*Geschichte*), and he writes the following:

Thus: history (*Geschichte*) can be written only by the experienced and superior person.... The voice of the past is always the voice of an oracle; only if you are architects of the future and are familiar with the present will you understand the oracular voice of the past... it is time we recognized that only those who build the future have the right to sit in judgment of the past.⁵³

In this passage Nietzsche reflects on what the nature of history (*Geschichte*) implies for the activity of historical interpretation (*Historie*), and his insistence that historical interpretation becomes possible only on the basis of our future-oriented activity points toward the primary importance of temporality. What modern historians fail to understand is the very *situation* of historical life—a situation in which past, present, and future are co-implicated—and therefore that historical interpretation is inseparable from ontological inquiry. Consider another passage, this one from a later work:

(S)hould we deny to those who come later the right to animate the older works as their own souls see fit? No, for these works can continue to live only if we give our souls to them: it is *our* blood that first lets them speak to *us*. A truly "historical" speech („*historische*" *Vortrag*) would speak in a ghostly way to ghosts.—We honor the great artists of the past less by the barren awe that leaves every word, every note lying where it was placed than by active efforts at helping them come back to life again and again.⁵⁴

⁵³ KSA 1, p. 294. Translation from Nietzsche, Friedrich (1998). *Unfashionable Observations*. Trans. Richard T. Gray. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 130.

⁵⁴ KSA 1, p. 431. Translation from Nietzsche (2013), pp. 56.

Nietzsche's talk of "ghosts" and "blood" should not distract us from his point: namely, that the task of interpretation needs to be complicated by the consideration that what has happened in the past (e.g., "older works") only becomes understandable when we embrace the co-implication of past and present. "(I)t is *our* blood that first lets them speak to *us*": our lives must be conceptualized—not as a present-at-hand reality existing *within* history—but rather as the space in which interpretation of what has happened in the past becomes possible. "Life" is our hermeneutic situation, and coming to an awareness of this hermeneutic situation presents the possibility of interpreting *better* and *further* than hitherto.

Let us conclude here. My thesis in this paper has been that Nietzsche's commentaries on hermeneutics are grounded upon his conception of "life" as the basic reality and of interpretation, and therefore these commentaries consist in a meta-critical reflection on hermeneutics which is deeply similar to what we see with contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. Contrary to the standard *Lebensphilosophie* reading, Nietzsche's concept of "life" serves a hermeneutic purpose in his writings, and this is best grasped by Heidegger and Gadamer. On the one hand, I believe that reading Nietzsche's concept of "life" as a concept of the "hermeneutic situation" is valuable for contemporary philosophical hermeneutics insofar as it allows us to use Nietzsche's writings to better understand what we mean when we talk about interpretive meaning as "living" or "dead." In *Truth and Method*, for example, Gadamer makes use of the concepts of "living" and "dead" at several important moments: he observes that scientific methodologies falsify the meaning of texts by failing to recognize that the meaning of a text is not a "dead meaning" but something "living"—it remains meaningful only to the extent that we permit it to say something "true" or "valuable" *for us*.⁵⁵ When we recognize Nietzsche's concept of "life" as a concept of the "hermeneutic situation", it becomes possible to read Nietzsche's writings as a series of meditations on "living" and "dead" meaning in this same direction. On the other hand, I believe that reading Nietzsche's concept of "life" as a concept of the "hermeneutic situation" is also valuable insofar as it unlocks an importantly ontological dimension of Nietzsche's philosophy: his concern with the ontological 'middle area' between life and death, present and past, and being and non-being. Once we consider that Nietzsche is attempting to reflect meta-critically on modern hermeneutic practices, we will see the genuine

⁵⁵ See Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2010). *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen, DE: J.C.B. Mohr, p. 172 & 419; for the English, see Gadamer (2013), p. 167 & 433.

respect in which Nietzsche's concepts of "life", the "will to power", and the "eternal return" are rooted in a deep meditation on temporality and historicity. For Nietzsche, the question of "life" becomes a fundamental inquiry into the nature of Being—something very close to the project of a hermeneutic ontology.

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