



Understanding Genealogy: History, Power, and the Self*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to clarify the relation between genealogy and history and to suggest a methodological reading of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. I try to determine genealogy's specific range of objects, specific mode of explication, and specific textual form. Genealogies in general can be thought of as drastic narratives of the emergence and transformations of forms of subjectivity related to power, told with the intention to induce doubt and self-reflection in exactly those readers whose (collective) history is narrated. The main interest in understanding the concept of genealogy and revisiting Nietzsche's introduction of it into philosophy lies in understanding how a certain way of writing and a certain textual practice function that successfully call into question current judgments, institutions and practices. Nietzsche's example, I argue, can provide a paradigm for a critical practice that accounts for historical processes of subject formation in terms of power and turns them against given forms of subjectivity.

Keywords

Nietzsche, Foucault, genealogy, critique, power, subject

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I. Introduction: Genealogy, Philosophy, History

Traditionally, the relationship between philosophy and history is an uneasy one, for both sides. The philosopher tends to resent the slow pace and narrow focus of historiographical work; the historian tends to be sceptical about philosophy's seemingly ungrounded speculations and passion for generalizations. However, several philosophies, most notably from the 18th century on, have successfully surpassed the confines of this stale dichotomy. The intellectual history of the 19th century in particular presents us with a whole universe of theoretical positions that – after Hegel, at least – don't *reconcile* history and philosophy, but *relate* them in various ways. Authors as different as Comte and Tocqueville or Spencer and Mill and Feuerbach or Marx seem to converge at least on this point: there is no strict opposition between the historical and the theoretical, but a productive and dynamic tension that itself can be articulated theoretically. All of these authors seem at the same time to try to “leave philosophy” (as they knew it) as much as they seem to try to establish the authority of a new theoretical discourse about human life that does justice to its historicity.¹

It is against the background of this intellectual constellation that Nietzsche's introduction of the term “genealogy” into philosophical discourse during the very last period of his intellectual biography can be understood. A serious concern with the historical was already haunting his work from the very beginning. His early philological writings that comment on the doubtful sources of classical texts are all about history. Similarly, his magisterial *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) is a book about origins and transformations or about the rise and the fall of a major cultural form.

One of Nietzsche's first strictly speaking philosophical texts, the famous *Untimely Meditation on the Uses and Abuse of History for Life* (1873) explicitly addresses the question of history as a seminal issue for the strength of a “culture”. It is also true that Nietzsche's mature thought as exemplified in *Human, All Too Human* (1878–79) and *The Gay Science* (1882) launches a systematic attack on his contemporary culture's core values and convictions and for this purposes uses a wide range of arguments some of which

¹⁾ For this construction of the intellectual history after Hegel see K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, first published in German in 1941); D. Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

belonging to the register of cultural and social history and even a form of speculative evolutionary theory. But it is not until *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) that under the title of “genealogy”, the historical gains a prominent role as a realm of knowledge that at the same time radically *challenges* philosophical convictions about morality and helps to fundamentally *reinterpret* the social function and existential role of moral judgements and ideals. Only in this way, i.e. genealogically, Nietzsche claims, it does finally become possible to pose the question of the “value of morality”.²

More than a century of Nietzsche scholarship has well established the importance of genealogy as something different from (traditional) philosophy but important to (some alternative form of) philosophy.³ Additionally, the enormous impact of Michel Foucault’s work and especially his methodological propositions for the human sciences many of which he connected to the very name “genealogy”, testifies to the productivity of such an outlook. But the precise relation of the historical and the philosophical in genealogy remains to be clarified. Countering the tendency in contemporary theoretical discourse to identify genealogy with historiography as such, the aim of this paper is to argue that the genealogical is not the historical *tout court*, but that it is not something altogether different, like a fully fleshed out philosophy of history either. Whereas some of Nietzsche’s finest interpreters attribute to him the view that “genealogy *is* history, correctly practiced”,⁴ I defend the claim that genealogy is history differently practiced, or, history with a difference that can only be accounted for philosophically. The distance to more traditional historiography can be exemplified on three counts. Compared to history or traditional historiography,

² F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. and transl. M. Clark and A. Swenson (London: Hackett, 1998), Preface, § 5, 4. The original phrase is “*Werth der Moral*”, see *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, vol. 4 of *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 2nd ed. (München/Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), 250.

³ Two by now classical versions of this idea were given by G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Athlone Press, 1983, first published in French in 1962), and A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

⁴ A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 46, cited approvingly by R. Geuss in his important essay “Nietzsche and Genealogy” in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy*, 17 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.

genealogy has a specific range of objects, a specific mode of explication, and a specific textual form, all of which makes genealogy a rather distinct, innovative and highly theoretical way of “writing history”.

Genealogy, therefore, is neither mere historiography (or “history, correctly practiced”) nor a philosophy of history or historical philosophy, but a new way to relate the historical and the philosophical. Genealogies essentially can be thought of as “critical” and “effective histories”, i.e. histories that fundamentally change the conception of what they are about.⁵ For this reason, genealogy in contemporary critical discourse is rightfully taken to be a major tool for social theory and social criticism; but one is mistaken to think that this intention is achieved by historicizing or contextualizing alone. Genealogy goes far beyond a mere methodological historicism in that it employs a rather sophisticated philosophical apparatus that frames and informs the genealogical narratives.

To review the relationship between philosophy and history that takes place under the name of genealogy, it is useful to revisit its original introduction and to present a rough outline of a systematic and methodological reading of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. To substantiate the claim that genealogies are histories with a philosophical difference, I will proceed in three steps that illuminate the specificity of Nietzsche’s genealogical writing. First, I will try to specify the seemingly vast range of objects that Nietzsche’s genealogies seem to have and argue for the more narrow view that they all relate, however indirectly, to the historical self or the subject. Second, I propose to understand all genealogies to refer to one major mode of explication, namely to describe social phenomena in terms of power. Third, I suggest to read these strange histories as hyperbolic texts that are intended to make an impression on its audience which is confronted with a narrative of power about its very own history. This effect can only come about on the basis of an elaborate style and textual form that is irreducible to accounts of historical “facts”. In all of these three dimensions (thematic scope, explanatory mode, and stylistic form) genealogy goes beyond traditional historiography and has to be understood as a genre of writing *sui generis*. I will close with some remarks on the use of such a reading of genealogy for present purposes.

⁵ See M. Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), whose title refers to Nietzsche’s characterization of his genealogy as the “effective” or “real history of morality” (“wirkliche Historie der Moral”), Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Preface, § 7, 6; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 254.

II. The Subject as Object: Histories of the Self

If one accepts Nietzsche's own description of his genealogical project in his *Genealogy of Morals*, one immediately sees that it obviously covers a ground between philosophy and history. While lamenting that on the side of philosophy nobody in the history of Western civilization has ever dared to pose the question of the "value of morality", the few interesting approaches he can see are various historical attempts to write the social and cultural history of morality.⁶ But he makes clear that these historical approaches, the "hypothesizing about the origin of morality", are only important for him "for the sake of an end to which it [i.e. the hypothesizing; M.S.] is one means among many", namely to inquire into the "value of morality". But this is not a historical question, but an urgent matter of present humanity and its future.⁷

A critique of present-day morality that makes use of but isn't reducible to the history of morality therefore poses a "new challenge" and what it presupposes is some kind of knowledge about the past: "for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they [i.e. the moral values; M.S.] have grown, under which they have developed and shifted (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as Tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as medicine, as stimulus, as inhibitor, as poison), knowledge of a kind that has neither existed up until now nor even been desired".⁸

So Nietzsche's critique evidently is two-fold. He reproaches *moral philosophy* for being blind to the historicity and multiplicity of its object. But he also accuses the *history of morality* first, of not being bold enough to develop a *critique* of moral values and second not to provide the effective material i.e., the "knowledge" to bring it about. What it does not do is to connect its object (moral practices and convictions) to its social functions and purposes. So far, moral history cannot account for the effects morality has on human subjects and cannot account for the costs and risks involved

⁶ Nietzsche apparently has in mind his friend P. Rée and probably authors such as W. H. E. Lecky, H. Spencer, T. H. Buckle, maybe even D. Hume and J. Bentham. For references see D. Thatcher, "Zur Genealogie der Moral: Some Textual Annotations", *Nietzsche-Studien*, 18 (1989), 587–599; W. Stegmaier, *Nietzsches "Genealogie der Moral"* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 32–34, 66–70.

⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Preface, § 5, 4; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 251.

⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Preface, § 6, 5; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 253.

in having (and living) a certain set of moral values. In Nietzsche's naturalist semantics, this becomes a question of the "strength", "growth", "health" or "splendour" and its diagnosis a matter of "symptoms", but this might mislead the expectations of what the *Genealogy of Morals* will actually provide. What the book gives us are descriptions of how and under which "conditions and circumstances" certain moral practices and norms have emerged and have been institutionalized and therefore have become part of an established form of life.

So, one might say, Nietzsche's way of answering his own question after the "value of morality" takes the form of histories of the emergence, acceptance and preservation of a moral system. But answers to this question cannot disregard subjective factors, because morality (understood as a system of moral concepts, practices, and beliefs) is the very field that constitutes moral agents or moral subjectivity. A "genealogy of morals" would therefore have to assess and evaluate the implications and consequences of the establishment and persistence of a certain moral order for individuals that are made into moral subjects by this very order. One look at the actual themes of the *Genealogy* can show that this might be – at least – one of its main interests in its three parts or "treatises".

The first treatise on "'Good and Evil', 'Good and Bad'" traces the emergence of the main moral concepts in modern post-Christian morality back to a prior set of evaluative concepts. It claims that modern morality derived out of an original form of conduct that celebrated opposite values. The second treatise on "'Guilt, 'Bad Conscience', and Related Matters'" tells a story about the emergence of the bad conscience out of moral practices of punishment and accountability and begins to assess the anthropological or psychological costs of a moral system that is ultimately based on guilt. The third treatise with the title "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?" tries to read much of contemporary morality and culture as being basically grounded in a denial of life that takes a multiplicity of forms, the most important of which are unconditional ideals in morality, art and science, that psychologically bind subjects to ethical self-denigration.⁹

⁹ For a compelling account of the variety of objects of Nietzsche's critique cf. A. Ridley, *Nietzsche's Conscience: Six Character Studies from the 'Genealogy'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

This rough summary can help to see that, methodologically speaking, an essential dimension of Nietzsche's genealogical history of morality is to narrate the history of morality as a history of processes of moral subject formation. It places the variety of moral practices, judgments and beliefs in their historical, social and cultural context and therefore destroys any illusion one might have about the naturalness or unity of the moral world. At the same time it pluralizes the moral subject in showing that in history a variety of conceptions of moral agency and moral worth were competing, and that the success of one form of morality meant the decline of another. This reveals post-Christian modern morality to be but one very specific form of understanding the accountability and the moral rights and obligations of human subjects. And genealogy is the attempt to assess the anthropological costs of the process that made this form of morality the *universal* reference point of Western civilization as Nietzsche sees it.¹⁰

These remarks cannot replace a full reading of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* that would substantiate the claim that his genealogy hinges on the explication of moral subject formation.¹¹ But they might help to see that a genealogy (of morality, at the very least) goes beyond the mere historicization of its object in that it relates historical processes to the effects they have on the construction and self-constitution of human actors. Nietzsche's objection against the social historians of morality is that they miss the point of morality and therefore cannot exploit the insights that might be gained from its history. Morality is a complex social institution that frames and shapes human subjects and human agency. To write its history is therefore to write (part of) the history of subjectivity. In order to contextualize and criticize morality a new kind of discourse is needed that turns the history of morality against certain moral concepts and institutions. It can do so only by becoming *more than a history* of moral behaviour and by digging deeper into the individualizing and subjectivating effects of different systems of morality. The "history of morals" can, in order to fulfil the purpose

¹⁰ Cf. Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 213–225; Geuss, "Nietzsche and Genealogy"; R. Geuss, "Nietzsche and Morality" in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167–198.

¹¹ For a more extensive reading cf. M. Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik: Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault* (Frankfurt/M./New York: Campus Verlag, 2007), 39–107, and for more methodological remarks M. Saar, "Genealogy and Subjectivity", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2002), 231–245.

of a critique of morality, only take the form of a “genealogy of morals” that tells the story of different ways of moral self-making.¹²

One might object that this feature is only due to the very specific theme of Nietzsche’s book. But the claim made here is more general. Since genealogies advance criticism and are meant to be answers to the “question of value”, the subjects for whom these values are valuable can never be left out of the picture. Morality is only the most explicit discourse that never hides its subject forming power. But most social and cultural institutions and practices shape and guide human conduct and self-identification and in that way leave traces in the way human actors are constituted by them. So what Nietzsche has done for morality, can easily be done for less visible forms of (not only moral, but cultural, political, bodily, economic, etc.) “self making”. Adequate objects of genealogical critique, therefore, are concepts, institutions and practices *in so far* as they can be said to influence and determine human conduct by tapping into subjects’ self-understanding and self-relation. Genealogy, in other words, is basically and generally concerned with historical objects that reflexively “interact” with human subjects.¹³ This explains why Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* is all about moral concepts, ethical ideals and the projections of conscience on the one hand, and social institutions and practices like punishment, promises, contracts and artistic and scientific activity on the other hand. All of these either internal or external instances frame and shape human action and self-understanding and are elements of the very web of determinations that “make” subjects.

Genealogies, therefore, are especially concerned with subjectivations and subjections, because it is only the knowledge of these histories that provides a knowledge that can be turned *against* cultural and social values and authorities. So the first way to specify how genealogy includes but also goes beyond history (in the sense of writing history) is to say that it writes

¹² For valuable discussions of the self as object of history and the problematics of a Nietzschean or Foucaultian approach to the subject for history cf. M. Potte-Bonneville, *Michel Foucault, l'inquiétude de l'histoire* (Paris: PUF, 2004); M. Bevir, “The Subject and Historical Theory”, *Distinktion* 15 (2007), 25–42.

¹³ I. Hacking, “Making up People” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 99–114; I. Hacking, “The Looping Effect of Human Kinds” in D. Sperber, D. Premack and A. James (eds.), *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 351–383.

histories of a specific kind with a specific interest and focus, namely in the vast range of practices, institutions and concepts that relate to human agency, self-understanding and conduct. This singles out a great many phenomena for genealogical treatment but leaves others out of the picture, because they are not proper (or urgent) objects of a critical discussion that affects contemporary identities.

III. Narrating Emergences: Histories about Power

If the first major difference between genealogy and more traditional historiography is the rather specific range of objects genealogy singles out for criticism, this does not tell much about the way in which these specific critical histories of the subject are told. For this, it has to be specified what the content of a genealogical narrative actually is and how it weaves together certain elements of the past into a story. Far from being standard historiography, genealogy relies on a heavily theoretical mode of explication, or rather on an explanatory mechanism that it deploys to bring about surprising and indeed non-standard readings of the past.

It can come as no surprise that the philosopher who wrote that “life itself is will to power”, will also talk about moral selves and their history in terms of power.¹⁴ But this is nothing that lies on the surface of the *Genealogy of Morals*, which generally and in comparison to some of Nietzsche’s other works does not make too much use of the terms “power” and “will to power” at all. But still the basic methodological idea about the “will to power” being an explanatory concept that can help to decipher “life” as such is present everywhere in the text and guides even the most minute of Nietzsche’s highly stylized descriptions of contemporary forms of life and cultural ideals. For him, all expressions of “life”, all human conduct is to be seen in the broader context of the struggles of life-forms for survival and self-preservation, enhancement and growth in – sometimes violent – relation to other forms of life that might enhance or diminish the first ones.

As is well known, Nietzsche in his notebooks toys with the idea to develop a general metaphysics of life with the idea of “will to power” or

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Press, 1990), I, § 13, 44; *Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 4)*, 27–28.

rather a multiplicity of “wills to power” as the major ontological principle.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the *Genealogy of Morals* hardly ever makes reference to this rather broad conception, and even the important revision that for human beings the “feeling of power”, not necessarily actual power (e.g. physical strength) is the important point of reference whose “maximum” is the desirable goal of the individual will, occurs only *en passant*.¹⁶

The main reference to power as an explanatory concept in the *Genealogy of Morals* occurs in the rather narrow context of a methodological reflection on how to write the history of punishment as a social practice. But, as he makes clear, what he is about to say is of central relevance to the writing of history (in his understanding of that enterprise) in general. Rather immodestly, he introduces his discussion by claiming that “for history there is no more important proposition” than the following principle: “that the cause of the genesis of a thing and its final usefulness, its actual employment and the integration into a system of purposes, lie *toto coelo* [whole heaven, entirely; M.S.] apart”.¹⁷ This dissociation of past and present meanings, purposes and usages introduces a methodology of discontinuity, because it prevents the genealogist from reducing present phenomena to their preceding forms (or vice versa). But how to account for the shifts and changes in meaning, purpose and function? Here Nietzsche makes use of certain metaphors that combine his perspectivist epistemology and his conception of power. The genealogist has to follow the “proposition” just mentioned and see

that something extant, something that has somehow or other come into being, is again and again interpreted according to new views, monopolized in

¹⁵ Cf. V. Gerhardt, *Vom Willen zur Macht: Anthropologie und Metaphysik der Macht am exemplarischen Fall Friedrich Nietzsches* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1996); J. Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); G. Abel, *Nietzsche: Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr*, 2nd ed. (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1998).

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III, § 7, 75; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 350 (“Maximum im Machtgefühl”). For helpful discussions that make more of this point cf. P. Patton, “Nietzsche and Hobbes”, *International Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2001), 99–116; P. Patton “Nietzsche on Rights, Power and the Feeling of Power” in V. Roodt and H. Siemens (eds.), *Nietzsche, Power, and Politics* (forthcoming); D. Owen, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), 34–37.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II, § 12, 50; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 312.

a new way, transformed and rearranged for a new use by a power superior to it; that all happening in the organic world is an *over-powering*, a *becoming-lord-over*; and that, in turn, all overpowering and becoming-lord-over is a new interpreting, an arranging of all means of which the previous “meaning” and “purpose” must of necessity become obscured or entirely extinguished. [...] But all purposes, all utilities, are only *signs* that a “will to power” has become lord over something less powerful and has stamped its own functional meaning onto it. [...] The “development” of a thing, a practice, an organ is accordingly least of all its *progressus* toward a goal, still less a logical and shortest *progressus*, reached with the smallest expenditure of energy and cost, – but rather the succession of more or less profound, more or less independent processes of overpowering that play themselves out in it, including the resistances expended each time against these processes, the attempted changes of form for the purpose of defense and reaction, also the results of successful counter-actions. The form is fluid but the “meaning” is even more so...¹⁸

This dense and difficult passage lays out many different traces and conjures up quite a mass of opponents (utilitarians, Darwinists, Hegelians, philosophical traditionalists) but the basic *methodological* proposal is rather straightforward: After one has understood the essential discontinuity of historical objects, i.e. the fact that their function, meaning and purpose can change over time, one should try to account for the fact of such changes in terms of power and “*over-powering*” (*Überwältigen*), i.e. in terms of violent struggles of competing forms of life.

The genealogist, one might say, is a historian who has grasped all this and proceeds from there. And what he does ceases to resemble traditional historiography because he starts to “read” or decipher historical objects and events differently. For him (or her), the form and function of an institution, a value or a social practice is a readable “sign” for the powerful processes of establishing and sustaining a system of institutions, values or practices.¹⁹ The emergence of new such objects (such as the advent of new social conventions) indicates a transformation in the systems of forces and powers that structure a given society at a historical point.

To insist on the historicity and fluidity of “meaning” (or *Sinn*), as Nietzsche does at the end of the passage cited, is the ground rule for a radically new

¹⁸) Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II, § 12, 50–51; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 312–313.

¹⁹) Cf. Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 107–108; Stegmaier, *Nietzsches “Genealogie der Moral”*, 70–93.

way of looking at historical events and cultural and social institutions. The thematic context for this passage is the history of punishment. For this case, Nietzsche can convincingly claim that its social function is over-determined because all he has to do is to merely list the different theoretical conceptions and concrete forms of punishment in the history of Western civilization.²⁰ In a way that has not only struck Michel Foucault in its astonishing actuality, Nietzsche can show that the image and the practice of punishment have been a field of eternal contestation and redescription on which moral, religious, political and social forces have clashed. A genealogy of punishment, therefore, would be a history that deciphers the various passages and transformations that involve competing actors and violent confrontations between interests and goals that have led to the present-day punitive system.²¹

This brief discussion of Nietzsche's thinking on the historicity of meaning and the methodology of a non-illusory form of history might provide some plausibility for the claim that in the *Genealogy of Morals* the doctrine of the "will to power" plays the role of an explanatory mechanism that makes historical events and changes "readable".²² Genealogy, one might conclude, is a non-standard, highly interpretative way of writing history that connects historical events to the individual and collective dynamics of competing forces. "Power" and related terms (like over-powering, violence, coercion, subjection, exploitation, strategy, and interest) are used to transform what looks like a peaceful realm of (historical) facts into a dynamic field of social processes. And "power" (or "will to power") is the name given to the driving force in them.

These formulations do not answer the important questions whether Nietzsche thinks that these struggles are restricted to individual human actors, if collective actors can be said to be driven by or to express their

²⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II, § 12, 53–54; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 313–316.

²¹ This is definitely part of what Foucault was trying to do in *Discipline and Punish*. For discussions of this point cf. M. Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 129–155; D. Hoy, "Nietzsche, Hume and the Genealogical Method" in R. Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 251–268; R. Visker, *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique* (London: Verso, 1995), ch. 2.2.

²² For a more extensive elaboration of the heuristics of power Nietzsche uses, see M. Saar, "Forces and Powers in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*" in Roodt and Siemens (eds.), *Nietzsche, Power, and Politics*.

very own “will to power”, too, if these struggles are fought intentionally or whether they can be thought of as systemic processes etc.²³ To answer these questions, one would have to delve deeper into Nietzsche’s theory of action and social ontology. Of course, these controversial matters cannot be unrelated to his proposal of a novel way of writing history. But they do not put into question the second methodological point that sets genealogy apart from traditional historiography on a general level: Genealogy is the tracing of effects and dynamics of power behind and below the already constituted objects of history. It tells their history in the form of narratives of power.

IV. Scandalizing Origins: Hyperbolic Histories for Real People

The difference between Nietzschean genealogy and the general writing of history has so far been drawn on two levels. First, genealogy is the writing of history of specific objects relating to processes of subject formation or self making. Second, genealogy tells specific histories that make use of a specific set of explanatory concepts all of which can be said to be based in a certain conception of power. Having established these two features as necessary elements of genealogical writing it becomes possible to say what in general the content of a genealogical narrative is. Genealogies are stories told about the historical emergence and transformation of concepts, practices or institutions that relate to the making of selves by influencing their self-understanding and way of conduct. These stories are told in such a way that the very emergence and transformation becomes readable or intelligible as processes involving competing forces and struggles between different actors. In other words, these stories narrate histories of the self as histories of power.

But there is a third feature of genealogies that sets them apart from many other historical accounts. It is this feature that marks a crucial distance to ordinary historical texts in that it specifies the textuality of genealogies. While the first two features might (and of course have been)

²³ For useful discussions of Nietzsche’s conception of power cf. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, chs. II.6, II.11; M. Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 1–12, 79–158; D. Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason* (London: Sage, 1995), 42–47; V. Gerhardt, “Wille zur Macht” in H. Ottmann (ed.), *Nietzsche-Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), 351–355.

integrated into more traditional historiographical projects, it is in terms of style, rhetoric and form that genealogies go to the limits of this discourse. It makes sense to think of genealogy as a “genre” of writing history in order to indicate that the stylistic form of this writing is not external to what is to be expressed in it or to its content, namely the histories of subject and power discussed so far. From a variety of possible approaches to the formal specificity of genealogy, I will here make use only of two. One is concerned with the irreducible rhetorical dimension of genealogy, and the other with its mode of addressing its own audience (or readership).

Even if Nietzsche’s genealogy contains substantial suggestions as how to read historical processes, his proposals will never be found in any history textbook. The genealogical theses about history, origins and emergences of values, institutions and practices are by their very nature experimental. What they offer are hypothetical scenarios in which a specific origination or emergence is told in terms of causal processes related to power. These scenarios are created in a highly artificial way, by making use of imaginative metaphors and colourful illustrations. Nietzsche’s artful and excessive use of rhetoric, his conscious strategy of simplification and allegorization should be taken to indicate that what he offers are less historical accounts in the strict sense but highly theoretical points in the form of fictive historical scenes. This does not mean that Nietzsche did not raise any truth-claims in describing the processes in question. He definitely aims at revealing the real inner connection between morality and power nobody dared to articulate so far. But the means to establish this link are theoretical fictions or thought-images rather than what is traditionally called a historical argument.

Take as an example Nietzsche’s grand narrative about the two types of morality (“slave” and “herd morality” or “noble” or “master morality”) as being two completely different sets of ethical orientation that were in historical conflict.²⁴ Nietzsche in his own description raises doubts about the real existence of these quasi ideal-typical entities but nevertheless goes on to make use of it in the redescription of the history of Christianity – the latter for him perfectly expressing the features of a slave morality. His story of the “slave revolt in morality”, the moment where the protagonists of “slave morality” take over and ideologically dominate the rest of society

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, IX, § 260.

and even the “noble” and in reality stronger individuals, rests on a stylization that is highly creative.²⁵ The “slave revolt” might have been a long historical process that “has happened” in the history of Western societies in the sense that there definitely was a gradual long-term development in which attitudes and mentalities towards basic moral concepts have changed. But it definitely never was a “moment” or a real event of a “revolt” with a time, a place and specific agents. But Nietzsche tells a story about this process as if it was a moment in time and space; he gives names, dates, and places.

A similar case is Nietzsche’s narration of the origin of consciousness out of evolutionary necessities and of the moral capacities out of non-moral practices. Depicting these emergences as real events and singular leaps in history, he consciously allegorizes long continual processes into historical thought images or snap shots of history. However, of course, consciousness did not only evolve right out of social practices of punishment and the holding accountable of creditors.²⁶ Nietzsche’s genealogical speculation cannot be taken to be a historical account referring to identifiable times, places and situations. Nevertheless, as a general theoretical point of course, it contains some striking truth. His hypotheses about the formation of collective structures, the processes of subject formation and the gradual change of mentalities are not formulated in a way that gives away their speculative character. Rather, Nietzsche dresses them up in the form of genealogical “primary scenes” to produce some kind of “reality effect” (Barthes). And this is no theoretical “mistake”, it is a conscious stylistic strategy. The long term workings and effects of power, influence, dressage and manipulation cannot be accounted for by pointing to single observable relationships between empirical objects. But Nietzsche makes it look as if one could do so, and this is, of course, a strategic employment of hyperbole or exaggeration, and he does it for a reason: to start to make power visible and thinkable even in areas where one would never have expected it.

These rhetorical mechanisms deeply structure the genealogical narratives, and this is something that Nietzsche, one of the most conscious philosophical writers and a life-long student of the history of ancient rhetoric,

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, V, §§ 186, 195, 202; *On the Genealogy of Morality*, I, §§ 7, 10–14; III, §§ 13–15.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II, §§ 5–6, 8–10.

is unlikely not to have intended.²⁷ But this also means that genealogy was not meant to compete with ordinary historiography. Far from being “history, correctly practiced”, the history that genealogy writes is intended to be hypothetical or even virtual. The genealogist does not intend to make single historical points. What he tries to achieve is to construct a web of relations between realms so far understood to be worlds apart, as culture and violence, morality and aggression, religion and self-negation. The genealogical attempt to establish these connections in such an apodictic and imaginative fashion has to be called conscious, even methodical hyperbole and it should be read as an attempt to directly relate to the affective constitution of its readers.²⁸

There is a second sense, in which genealogy can be called a kind of writing that is consciously and excessively rhetorical and this refers to the way in which the genealogical text directly relates to its very audience. More than only being texts about something, genealogies are about someone, namely selves and their power-laden histories. And they are told to exactly those subjects the stories are said to be about, namely Nietzsche’s contemporaries in a post-Christian culture. It is not accidental but constitutive for genealogies to address and to be addressed to the very subjects whose (hypothetical or virtual) history is told as a tale of power. One might call this rhetorical trait of Nietzsche’s genealogical texts a form of “implication” as a shorthand for the formal feature that what the text is about is mirrored in whom it addresses.²⁹

²⁷ For Nietzsche’s thought on ancient rhetoric see the discussion in J. Kopperschmidt and H. Schanze (eds.), *Nietzsche oder “Die Sprache ist Rhetorik”* (München: Fink, 1994).

²⁸ For more on Nietzsche’s style see S. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* (London: Athlone Press, 1993, first published in French in 1972); E. Behler, “Nietzsches Sprachtheorie und der Aussagecharakter seiner Schriften”, *Nietzsche-Studien*, 25 (1996), 64–86; Nehamas, *Nietzsche*; for an excellent discussion of the relationship between hyperbole and critical thinking in general cf. A. G. Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

²⁹ For a comparable but different way of conceptualizing the “implication” of readers cf. W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, first published in German in 1972); for “address” as a formal feature of speech and writing see the opening pages of J. Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld and D. Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67.

Nietzsche's obsession with being heard, being read and being understood is omnipresent in his writing but one reason for this is that his writing is ultimately dependent on his audience. On a formal level already, the genealogical text "implicates" and "addresses" its very audience and performs and stages this very structure. But this formal trait corresponds to the content of genealogy. Genealogy is the historicizing reflection on the emergence of forms of subjectivity, so it is all about selves. And it is exactly these very selves that the genealogical narratives are addressed to. Genealogies address an audience that is supposed to recognize itself in these narratives even if what they see provides them with a new troubling, estranging view of themselves. This effect of estrangement is brought about by genealogy's suggestion to see how the subjects in question are always already influenced and determined by powers and forces so far unseen, that subjects, as it were, are "implicated" in power.

This insight and effect is brought about equally by the genealogical arguments and by the hyperbolic genealogical style. The aim of genealogical writing is exactly to raise affects and to stir up doubts and questions about the present form of subjectivity. One might say that the genealogical text is meant to put the readers' identity into crisis by confronting them with descriptions about themselves that radically contradict their own self-understanding and thereby to encourage them to revise their judgements and practices, and this means ultimately, to revise themselves. But to describe the goal of genealogy in this way, one has indeed left the field of theory and history proper and has started to think of genealogies as "practical" texts with an existential dimension. But to claim this to be an essential feature of the genealogical text itself means once more to mark its difference from any mere historical text.³⁰

V. Conclusion: Histories of the Present

The aim of the previous discussion was to determine the way in which genealogy differs from more traditional historiography. While genealogy

³⁰ That genealogy aims at critical reflection of convictions and attitudes and takes the form of a "test" is one of the main points of the discussions in Geuss, "Nietzsche and Genealogy"; D. Owen, "Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2002), 231–245; B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

for Nietzsche definitely was one way of introducing history into philosophy and of performing a historical critique of philosophy's claim to universality and transhistorical validity, he was not merely substituting history for philosophy.³¹ Genealogy, I have tried to argue on the basis of a reading of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, is a hybrid discourse with a logic of its own, a genre of historical-philosophical writing with a critical intention. It differs from traditional historiography on three levels. First, on the level of thematic scope, it has a narrow range of objects and is only interested in tracing the histories of values, practices and institutions that relate to subjectivities and self-formation. Second, on the level of explication, its main explanatory mechanism is to relate the historical data to an account of forces and powers. Third, on the level of textuality, genealogies proceed in a specific form with specific rhetorical features, the two most important of which are a conscious use of hyperbole, allegorization and exaggeration and a complex "implication" of the text's audience. In sum, in this reconstruction genealogies appear as drastic narratives of the emergence and transformations of forms of subjectivity related to power, told with the intention to induce doubt and self-reflections in exactly those (present day, European, post-Christian) readers whose (collective) history is narrated. Such narratives have not been attempted by (most forms of) traditional historiography, and they remain something that philosophy cannot do without the recourse to history.

This attempt to establish the specificity not of any genealogical "method", but of genealogical writing, might help to clear the ground for questions of how to situate certain later more or less post-Nietzschean projects and how to actualize and continue genealogical work for the purpose of social and cultural criticism, i.e. for the purpose of assessing and re-evaluating contemporary possibilities of and restrictions on being a subject. This reading can help to illuminate the deep continuity of Nietzschean themes in that part of his work that Foucault himself has called "genealogical" and that included a highly original account or "analytics" of power that was developed for the purposes of specific historical analyses.³² It can also explain

³¹ Cf. P. Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984, first published in French in 1971); P. Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History" in C. Porter and A. Davidson (eds.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997, first published in French in 1978), 146–182.

³² M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*:

why he was eagerly trying to propose a revised and deeply historical understanding of subjectivity that relentlessly tracks the traces of power in subjectivity but also leaves room for agency, the self acting for and on itself.³³ It might finally help to see that even Foucault's monographs, that completely resemble archival historiography, perform functions that have to be accounted for in terms of rhetoric and style and whose practical aims are nothing else than "activist": They are meant to motivate self-reflection and self-revision and to stir up resistance against already established judgments, institutions and practices.³⁴ Showing that their origins and emergences are contingent and related to power can help in denaturalizing and demystifying them. This is not the end, but the unavoidable beginning of the complex social practice of questioning authority that we call *critique*.³⁵

So, the main interest in understanding the concept of genealogy and revisiting Nietzsche's introduction of it into philosophy lies in understanding how a certain way of writing and a certain textual practice function that successfully calls into question current judgments, institutions and practices. Nietzsche's example can provide a paradigm for a critical practice that accounts for historical processes of subject formation in terms of power and turns them against given forms of subjectivity offered and maintained as the only ways to be a subject. Introducing historicity, contingency and insight into the workings of power into contemporary discourses about viable identities and liveable forms of life turns them into critical reflections on the state of subjects today. And the question of the subject is ultimately a question of self-transformation and social

Essential Works, Vol. II, ed. J. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998, first published in French in 1971), 369–391; M. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works*, Vol. I, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: The New Press, first published in 1983), 253–280. For methodological discussions cf. Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy*; Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik*, 188–204; T. Biebricher, *Selbstkritik der Moderne: Foucault und Habermas im Vergleich* (Frankfurt/M./New York: Campus Verlag, 2005), 98–109.

³³ M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in *Power: Essential Works*, Vol. III, ed. J. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000, first published in 1982), 326–348.

³⁴ See also Thomas Biebricher's contribution to this volume.

³⁵ J. Tully, "Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity", *Political Theory*, 30 (2002), 533–555; T. Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique", *Rethinking Marxism*, 14 (2002), 49–64.

contestation and therefore a matter of ethical and political engagement.³⁶ Nietzsche's model can show that in order to do this, historicizing is necessary, but in itself is not enough. A robust historicist picture of the self or forms of subjectivity is needed, too; similarly, a differentiated conception and typology of power and its forms is a theoretical presupposition without which the historical narratives will not get any critical bite. Finally, the genealogist must not confuse his or her activity with a disinterested writing of history. To produce the shock and confusion that are needed to help subjects to disengage from what they have become, textual techniques of estrangement and confrontation with the unfamiliar about oneself have to be used. Only when genealogies transcend the past they can open up the space for self-transformation beyond the confines and limits of what one has become.

³⁶ W. Brown, "Politics without Banisters: Genealogical Politics in Nietzsche and Foucault" in *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 91–120; J. Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue" in D. Ingram (ed.), *The Political* (Boston: Blackwell, 2002), 212–228.

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