

“Some Third Thing”:  
Nietzsche’s Words and the Principle of Charity

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this paper is to begin a conversation about how we read and write about Nietzsche and, relatedly, other figures in the history of philosophy. The principle of charity can appear to be a way to bridge two different interpretative goals: getting the meaning of the text right and offering the best philosophy. I argue that the principle of charity is multiply ambiguous along three different dimensions, which I call “unit,” “mode,” and “strength”: consequently, it is not a single, neutral or independent principle to which we can helpfully appeal and it cannot, in itself, perform this bridging function. Nietzsche, I suggest, is particularly ill-suited to some forms of charitable reading. I compare charity to what I call “misreporting” a philosopher’s words, in order to highlight some problematic structural similarities. Finally, I assess what charity might be doing instead, if it is not intended to bridge meaning and best philosophy.

Nietzsche imagines Beethoven coming back to life and hearing a performance of one of his works in the very different style of the later nineteenth century: “‘That is neither I nor not-I but some third thing’,” says Nietzsche’s Beethoven, after a long pause, “‘— and it seems right in a way [etwas Rechtes], even if it is not *exactly right* [*das Rechte*]. But you had better take care what you’re doing, for you are the ones who have to listen to it—and the living are right, as our Schiller says. So *be* right and let me be off again” (AOM 126; KSA 2, p. 432).<sup>1</sup>

Any interpretation of Nietzsche worthy of the name will produce neither the pure Nietzsche, nor the pure thoughts of the interpreter, but some third thing. The aim of this paper is to begin a conversation about that third thing, about how we read and write about Nietzsche’s philosophy. By ‘we’ I mean to pick out those broadly in the analytic tradition of Nietzsche scholarship—to which, if to any interpretative tradition, this author firmly belongs. Of course, the analytic tradition is not the only tradition which might benefit from taking a moment to consider how it uses Nietzsche’s words. I focus on the analytic Nietzsche partly

because analytic interpretations are the ones I engage with most often and so it is here that I would most like to see more reflection. But I also choose to focus here because analytic interpretations are, at the moment, dominant, at least in Anglophone philosophy departments.

It is common to distinguish between two ways of reading texts by figures in the history of philosophy. The first has, as its prime goal, the meaning of the text in question, typically by the standards of the author or the author's contemporaries: this is sometimes called contextual, historical, or historicist interpretation. In one canonical description, the test here proceeds roughly along the lines Nietzsche imagines for Beethoven: would the author recognise these thoughts as her own? The second has, as its prime goal, making a contribution to current philosophical debate: variously, this can be known as appropriationist, applicative, or philosophical interpretation. Usually, the way to contribute to some current philosophical debate is (as you see it) to get something right.

To distinguish these goals is not to sever any connection between them. It is likely that a purely historicist, neutral reading of a text is impossible because a philosophical contribution from the interpreter must come into play at some level.<sup>2</sup> But the difference is clear. Sometimes, as interpreters, we don't have to choose between the meaning and the best or most useful philosophy, as when Nietzsche makes a good point, or reframes a discussion, that we think has been overlooked or forgotten by our contemporaries. Sometimes, however, we do have to choose. To say we have to choose is not to say either option is bad. I cannot see why anybody would object to historicist or appropriationist reading *per se*, provided that the interpreter is explicit about what she is doing. But the argument of this paper is that we are not clear, and hence not explicit, about our practice in relation to these two goals. My focus is one particular feature of our practice: the principle of charity.

### **Charitable Interpretation**

The principle of charity operates roughly as follows: when faced with two rival interpretations of what someone is saying, we should not interpret her as meaning the one that leaves her in the worse light. There are two motivations. First, charity enables access to the *meaning* by choosing the “best light” interpretation. Second, charity guarantees, in the words of one of its critics, that there is “better philosophy around.”<sup>3</sup>

We return to the second towards the end. Sticking with the first, notice that, in everyday contexts, this is something we do all the time. Just yesterday, I suggested meeting with a friend. He wrote back: “I’m sorry, I can make it.” The literal meaning is perfectly clear, but it sounds odd. I guessed that what he meant was “I’m sorry, I can’t make it.” This was the interpretation that left him, I supposed, in the best light: not rude, oddly conflicted or irrational but, like us all, not always a careful proof-reader of his messages. I guessed right, getting to the meaning via the best light.

Now suppose you face two rival interpretations of Nietzsche’s writing: the one that leaves him in the best light, we might think, is the one that is, philosophically speaking, the best. Charity, thus interpreted, has a bridging function between the two goals discussed at the start. Getting to the best philosophical position (first goal) brings you closer to the *meaning* of the text (second goal) because, following the principle of charity, the best philosophical position is how we should read the text. But there are several reasons to think that the principle of charity, even if we affirm it in some sense, cannot bridge the gap between reading for meaning and reading for best philosophy. In fact, the principle of charity is a multiply ambiguous affair, which can be understood in different ways along three different dimensions, which I’ll call its unit, its mode, and its strength.

## **Charity’s Unit**

The principle of charity, as I have modelled it above, could be taken to apply to two slightly different scenarios, both involving a choice between two different options. In the first instance, Nietzsche might utter a phrase which could be interpreted by us as meaning, for example, either that conscious deliberations *rarely* cause actions or that they *never* cause actions. Charity might be invoked to choose which he meant. In the second instance, the two different options are different things that the philosopher says. Nietzsche unambiguously says in different places, let us suppose, *both* that conscious deliberations do *and* that they do not cause actions. Charity might be invoked, again, to choose which, if either, he meant.

In the first case, there was one sentence which could be read two ways. The second case is different. In deciding what Nietzsche “meant,” I am in fact deciding which of two positions he ultimately committed to. The semantic meaning of each claim is plain to me in this second case. ‘Meant’, then, has two different meanings. In the first, it is a question of disambiguation. In the second, ‘meant’ indicates deeply held philosophical commitment: he *said* it, but he didn’t really *mean* it. (As in: “he said he was sorry, but he didn’t really *mean* it!”) These are two different “units” of charity. They may be related: already knowing some of your commitments might help me to adjudicate between ambiguous meanings. But they are distinct.

### **Charity’s Mode**

What is the charitable way to interpret the participant in the seventeenth-century witch trial, when she claims the accused is a “witch,” who rode on a broom to a Sabbat? The belief in witches, it has been comprehensively argued, was supported by the leading contemporary scientific, historical and religious systems of thought; it fit with what many people considered themselves justified in believing and, to that extent, might be called “rational.”<sup>4</sup> But, in truth, there are no witches who ride on brooms: some accusers must have suspected as much. Is it

more charitable to argue that someone did believe in witchcraft (coherence) or that she did not (truth)?

By the “mode” of charity, I mean the way that we understand “best light”—in this case, presumably, best philosophy. Reading over various candidate definitions for charity, one does not find agreement. While consistency and coherence are common,<sup>5</sup> appeals are also made to truth (or views that are not “false”),<sup>6</sup> agreement with what we already think or with “what the interpreter takes to be true or reasonable,”<sup>7</sup> soundness of argument (together with consistency with other “relevant texts” of the author)<sup>8</sup> or truth on the condition of not being “tame or boring”<sup>9</sup>—i.e., *interest*. But sometimes these desiderata pull in different directions. Agreement with what we already think might diverge from the absence of boredom or tameness. As with witchcraft, coherence and truth come apart. One could imagine an interpreter suspending charity (mode: contradiction) in order to be more charitable (mode: more interesting philosophy by another standard).<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche might appear more *reasonable* if I suppose him to have held a certain *false* belief, about which he probably should have known better.

### **Charity’s Strength**

Whichever unit and mode we have in mind, how “charitable” I am might, itself, be a variable. This is charity’s “strength.” Interpreting Aristotle, Lessing writes: “Aristotle is not often guilty of a palpable contradiction. Where I would seem to find one *in such a man* I prefer rather to mistrust my own reason.”<sup>11</sup> “In such a man,” Lessing means to say—but not in others. Whichever mode we choose, some authors are going to be “better”: more consistent, more interesting, more accurate than others. Was *Nietzsche* “such a man”?

There are two different approaches to answering this question. First, one could agree with Lessing that the strength of charity ought to vary from interpretee to interpretee. We

would then have to discuss how “good” Nietzsche is with respect to the chosen mode. Rather than saying that a reading is charitable or uncharitable, we would need to say that it is charitable with respect to what we already think we know about Nietzsche, as demonstrated *independently* of any application of charity to his texts.

Second, one could say, *contra* Lessing, that charity should have uniform strength. But how strong should this uniform strength be? For some Aristotle interpreters, charity appears to ensure that an interpretation which ascribes a fallacy to him is, *for that reason*, not a flawless *interpretation*.<sup>12</sup> But if charity is maximally strong, then any connection with everyday meaning and interpretation has been severed: nobody thinks that ordinary people, or indeed any people, when putting forward philosophical ideas, really mean the most truthful or most consistent thing that an analytically trained philosopher could interpret them to mean. (Davidson’s quite different, inter-linguistic “principle of charity” had to be defended *against* the conclusion that it would turn all language users into excellent philosophers.<sup>13</sup>) Where someone could be construed as claiming that P or Q, and P is “better” than Q by the chosen mode, they might, *of course*, have nonetheless been claiming that Q. If the strength of charity is weakened such that it is appropriate to minimally rational humans as a whole then as long as some such human holds that Q (or even: could plausibly hold that Q), then charity will not help us to choose between Q and the superior P. In philosophical contexts, that is, it will be useless.

A sensible midway point might be that charity’s strength lies at a level common to philosophers. But what kind of beliefs, attitudes or abilities can we justifiably assume to be common among philosophers? Writing in opposition to a principle of charity which states that implausible views should not be attributed “without pretty strong textual evidence,” Yitzhak Melamed counters that “no view should be attributed to *anyone* “without pretty strong textual evidence.”<sup>14</sup> But this, taken literally, does not seem quite right. Nietzsche did

not, as far as I know, ever write that London lies north of Paris—yet I would be happy to attribute that view to him because it was shared common knowledge. Probably we have to attribute all sorts of views, without strong textual evidence, in order to get going. But are any of these views philosophical? The principle of non-contradiction, which Aristotle holds as basic, is challenged by some; still, as with the belief that London is north of Paris, we might say it would be fair to assume that philosophers are committed to it, unless they explicitly state otherwise. But notice that a philosopher's commitment to the principle does not entail an absence of actual contradictions within the body of her work any more than a desire to seek the truth guarantees truth. Thus, certain formulations of the principle of charity risk muddying the waters if they do not disambiguate.

Ken Gemes writes that charity “admonishes interpreters not to ascribe incoherent views to interpretees” (“in the absence of probative evidence”).<sup>15</sup> An “incoherent view” might be that “it is a fact that there are no facts.” Weakly, this might mean we should not ascribe to Nietzsche (without probative evidence) the clear, explicit thought that it is a fact that there are no facts. As Aristotle himself suggests of a similar case, one could reasonably doubt whether someone could deeply hold, rather than merely say, such a thing.<sup>16</sup> But, more strongly, it might mean that we should not ascribe to Nietzsche a view which, as demonstrated by more philosophical work, entails that it is a fact that there are no facts—even when there is no evidence that Nietzsche himself carried out this work. Philosophers can certainly hold views of the latter kind, without realizing what they entail—as Gemes knows, because he himself does the philosophical work to demonstrate the entailment of incoherent or trivial views from apparently reasonable, substantial claims. So compare, “Nietzsche probably didn't think that it is a fact that there aren't facts” with, “View V entails that it is a fact that there aren't facts; Nietzsche probably didn't think that it is a fact that there aren't facts; so, Nietzsche probably didn't hold V.” The latter is more contentious than the former,

and unless we are clear which one we mean, we risk eliding the two, illegitimately associating the interpretative plausibility of the former with the interpretative freedom granted by the latter.

With charity disambiguated along these lines, we find presuppositions at all levels; often these presuppositions simply do not hold for everyday discourse. Whichever *unit* is chosen, there is some presupposition: that the author means some particular thing rather than something else; or that, of two apparently incompatible commitments, she is committed to one rather than the other (or perhaps to some third view which reconciles the two). If Nietzsche, deliberately or accidentally, wrote a truly ambiguous line of philosophy, then charity may wrongly disambiguate it one way or the other. If Nietzsche really, knowingly or unknowingly, deliberately or accidentally, committed himself to two opposed views on some matter, then charity along these lines may not allow the interpreter to leave it there; it will force her to get him wrong. Whichever *mode* is chosen presupposes a view about the best light in philosophy. Is the best philosophy the one that is truest, or most consistent, or most rational, or most interesting? If some combination, how do we aggregate or adjudicate? Even once we have made our choices regarding unit and mode, we must decide the *strength* of our commitment to Nietzsche's abilities or intentions in this regard: at what point, if at all, do we simply say that Nietzsche got something wrong? And is this point based on a view about the abilities of humans in general, about all philosophers, about Nietzsche himself?

There is no reason to think that every interpretative move labelled "charitable" would, in itself, turn out to be illegitimate. But charity is not a single, neutral or independent principle. Consequently, expressions such as "the principle of charity demands that..." or "the more charitable reading would be that..." risk disguising the sorts of commitments, justified or unjustified, that—I think most would agree—it is part of philosophical discourse to bring out, clarify, and challenge.

## Nietzsche and Charity's Assumptions

Thus far, we have spoken about charity at a level of abstraction which might apply to all figures in the history of philosophy. Even at this level, the principle has come in for criticism. Yitzhak Melamed, for example, views it as a “domestication project” that “distort[s] the views of past philosophers in order to reach the conclusions we prefer.”<sup>17</sup> The application of common sense to philosophical texts, Melamed argues, closes off the possibility of our own common sense views being challenged, even though challenging common sense ought to be part of philosophy.<sup>18</sup> In a rare instance within Nietzsche scholarship, R. Lanier Anderson worries that charity, when it insists on the interpreter's standards, risks making Nietzsche more conventional and less distinctive.<sup>19</sup> Finlayson argues that in political philosophy, a demand for charitable interpretation precludes deep disagreement and masks political presuppositions, while falsely appearing neutral.<sup>20</sup> While one could hardly claim that charity does this each and every time, a clearer awareness of charity's ambiguities shows why we might be worried about an interpreter's own presuppositions being smuggled into charity's unit, mode, or strength without even the interpreter being aware, effectively neutering any radically challenging thought.

But, with the dimensions set out as above, I want to say something further about Nietzsche and about analytic Nietzsche interpretation in particular. A brief look at the sorts of presuppositions we are considering should ring bells for those interested in Nietzsche's work. As for unit: Did Nietzsche always mean one thing rather than another? Did Nietzsche commit himself—or see it as advantageous or necessary to commit himself—to particular philosophical positions? These are not questions for which we should necessarily *presuppose* an affirmative answer. As for strength: some of Nietzsche's readers, including highly sympathetic ones, have concluded that he lacked traditional philosophical virtues—a

significant point if, with Lessing, we think that strength of charity follows from how much the interpretee has earned it.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Nietzsche, it seems evident, was interested in philosophising *about* just the sorts of things that are candidates for charity's mode. He seems, at least at times, to have thought that he was saying something surprising, interesting, provocative or indeed true about good philosophy itself, philosophical commitment, logic, truth, reason, interpretation, non-contradiction and agreement.<sup>22</sup> To take the principle of non-contradiction, raised earlier as a candidate for a charitable background assumption amongst philosophers: Nietzsche knew and, in places, *explicitly* challenged it—a point worth remembering when charity's mode is non-contradiction or consistency.<sup>23</sup> In such cases, he may have thought he was saying something that philosophers had not noticed or taken sufficiently seriously. That does not mean he succeeded. It does mean that if we wheel in our preconceived notions of truth, philosophy, and so on as preconditions for correct interpretation of Nietzsche, then we risk ruling out, in advance, the possibility of Nietzsche succeeding on his own terms. We cheat him out of meaning what he says, without doing him the honour of engaging with his ideas. To be clear, I make no objection to using our own philosophical tools to interpret a text, and I am not, myself, committing myself to a “peculiar” view of philosophy, or truth, etc.. My point is that the charity-user appears *not* to be using such tools, when in fact she is.

A critic might disagree, claiming that Nietzsche, in fact, as it turns out, did not have a peculiar view about truth or non-contradiction or philosophy and so the application of a standard principle of charity based on such notions is not missing his point. I do not dispute that here. (The citations above are merely candidates for discussion.) What I do say is that she cannot justify her view that Nietzsche has more conventional ideas about truth (for example) by pointing to his texts and interpreting them using something called the “principle of

charity,” which itself presupposes that he does not have peculiar views about truth. If you put a rabbit in a hat, you can’t be too surprised when, upon opening the hat, you find a rabbit. When are there “two equally plausible interpretations”?<sup>24</sup>

A natural objection to the argument I have just presented might run as follows: “Charity only kicks in when there are ‘two equally plausible interpretations’ to choose from. Of course, if Nietzsche unambiguously stated, outright, some peculiar or untenable philosophical view, then we would all agree that, unfortunately, he held it. When the text leaves things genuinely open, we are entitled to argue for the better option.” It would be wise, first, to remind ourselves of what might, and in fact does, count as “leaving things open.” Suppose, for example, that a view which falls foul of charity’s chosen strength and mode looks to be quite unambiguously stated. According to my respondent, this should be the end of the matter. But it is important to acknowledge that in practice this is not necessarily so. Can the interpreter claim that Nietzsche was being “hyperbolic” and that this was not his “considered position”? If so, it is now open whether or not he was being hyperbolic, and the charitable option is to say that, indeed, he was. Could Nietzsche, despite the unambiguous statement of his position, be guilty of “sloppy phrasing”? If so, it is now open whether or not he was phrasing things sloppily, and the charitable option is to say that he was. Can the placement of the claim in question be interpreted as a secret sign to knowing readers? If so, the text is “open” and the charitable option is to say that it is such a sign.<sup>25</sup> I do not say that in all cases such moves are, in fact, illegitimate.

My point is about the alleged priority and independence of “openness”: using some of these interpretative devices, *any* statement, in principle, no matter how emphatic or how unambiguous, could nonetheless count as leaving things open to a more charitable reading. My respondent claims that charity comes in only *after* openness. But we must admit that the reverse is likely in some instances: that “openness” is automatically generated by Nietzsche’s

apparent failure to meet the chosen strength and mode of charity. “*Because* this is false or inconsistent or implausible,” says the charitable interpreter, “it is open that this is merely hyperbole or sloppy phrasing or a deliberate strategy.” In such cases, my respondent would be guilty of what Nietzsche calls “*Cornarismus*”: mistaking the cause for the effect.<sup>26</sup>

The apparent limitation to “two equally plausible interpretations” must also be set against something about Nietzsche in particular. He was very good at writing ambiguously. Sometimes it is hard to know what some aphorism means. Still more difficult is to agree, with any certainty, on his philosophical commitments. The principle of charity, as it is often used, rewards this ambiguity in a manner which we might not want and which, at least, ought to be acknowledged. Suppose, in a simplified case, that two philosophers write a paper each. The first is sufficiently clear that it affords only one interpretation of the issue at hand, whereas the second allows for one hundred interpretations. Charity risks ensuring that the latter comes out best. It would do this if one of the one hundred plausible interpretations of the second text were deemed better than the unambiguous view offered by the first: offering any of the other ninety-nine interpretations would be uncharitable.

We might think that writing in an ambiguous, fertile manner which stimulates others to think in new and interesting ways is, itself, something we should be able to analyse and assess. The assessment might be positive: part of what Nietzsche is *trying* to do, it might be argued, is to produce the sorts of texts which simultaneously call for and resist the ascription of definite meaning or clear authorial commitment. Alternatively, and negatively, we might think that such wide-ranging ambiguity indicates a philosophical failure to distinguish and support one’s position. If it forces us to choose the better of two equally plausible interpretations and to deny that the author meant the other, charity does not allow us to ask the question: why *did* Nietzsche write ambiguously? Nietzsche’s texts, intentionally or otherwise, demand critical, philosophical discussion of their unusual ambiguity, but charity,

unquestioningly and unannounced, treats this feature as accidental, unfortunate, and easily brushed aside.<sup>27</sup>

### **Charity and Misreporting**

Charity is a mode of interpretation we typically endorse. To emphasise my concern, it is instructive to compare it, for this reason, with “misreporting,” by which I mean using Nietzsche’s words to make it seem as though he is saying something with those words that he is certainly not saying—a mode of interpretation, I assume, we do not endorse. The comparison points are: (i) both *can* function to resolve a tension between correct meaning and best philosophy; (ii) both advertise a commitment to meaning, *via* a recognised, meaning-seeking, scholarly technique (direct quotation, an interpretative “principle”); (iii) but (unknowingly or accidentally, I would assume) this technique in fact has the effect of *sacrificing* the meaning commitment, perhaps leaving more room for “best philosophy.”

The point about my labelling “misreporting” as such is that it should not be glossed as strong reading or the kind of selection and emphasis we all do. Nor can it be dismissed on the grounds that we never *really* know what someone means: to see that Nietzsche is misreported, one does not have to claim special insight into his unequivocal thought. To get a sense of the difference, and of the comparison I am making with charity, consider the following abstracted, simplified illustrations:

1. Nietzsche writes something like: “our knowledge *might* be false or, more coarsely and clearly: our knowledge is false.” An interpreter reports: “Nietzsche says our knowledge ‘*might* be false’, and, in the passage I just quoted, he is careful to suggest only that it *might* be false.”

2. Nietzsche writes, say, that “some drives do  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , whereas some drives do the exact opposite.” As part of an argument that *all* drives, in general, do  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , an interpreter writes: “Nietzsche thinks that ‘drives do  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$ ’.”
3. In a passage that does not mention will to power, Nietzsche writes, e.g.: “strength expresses itself as  $A$ ,  $B$  and  $C$ .” An interpreter writes that Nietzsche “explicitly claims that the will to power manifests itself ‘as  $A$ ,  $B$  and  $C$ ’.”
4. Nietzsche writes: “In an age of disintegration that mixes races indiscriminately, human beings [...]” This is quoted as: “In the present age, human beings...,” where Nietzsche’s own words are replaced by the author’s words.<sup>28</sup>

My claim here is not, of course, that charity just *is* misreporting. It isn’t. But in cases of misreporting, by citing Nietzsche’s words, interpreters invoke the principle that it matters to them that Nietzsche expressed what they say he expressed, highlighting a meaning-based constraint; in misreporting, that principle is invoked, while its aims are undermined—the importance of the currency is necessarily assumed in the act of debasing it. Thus, misreporting is more pernicious than merely saying, “Nietzsche thought that  $P$ ” when he did not.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, with meaning only *apparently* a constraint, more room remains for a preferred philosophical interpretation (though there’s no reason to suppose that either misreporting or charity guarantees this). For that reason, it is worth keeping an eye out for misreporting and, although this may reflect no more than a series of misunderstandings on my part, and although misreporting is easily, accidentally done, I will permit myself to say that I would prefer it if examples of the kind I have given were more difficult to come by. The central point is this: if my analysis has been correct, charity, when unanalysed, has the structurally pernicious features of misreporting that I highlighted. Yet misreporting could hardly be advertised as a methodological principle whereas charity, proudly, is.

## **Do We Really Care About What Nietzsche Meant?**

I mentioned two motivations for charity: a bridging function to meaning and the guarantee of there being better philosophy around. Focusing on the first, I have shown why I do not think that there is a single principle which can reliably perform this function and why it is damaging to suppose that there is. But perhaps that was never the aim. Perhaps users of charity are motivated by the second aim: trying to produce interesting philosophy in Nietzsche's name, regardless of whether Nietzsche really meant it or not. On this view, the principle of charity does not say that, of two options, what the philosopher herself *meant* (in either sense) was the "better" one; what it says is that, of the two options, we should choose the "better" one because it is better. As philosophers, we, the "living," might as well discuss the "best Nietzsche"—the living are always right.

Understanding certain analytic interpretations along these lines better accounts for how charity is sometimes employed. Consider a footnote in a work by Brian Leiter. He has been discussing two different, mutually inconsistent theories of how the will works, and he notes that there is evidence for both in Nietzsche's writing. Call them "Theory A" and "Theory B." Leiter argues that Theory A is best supported by current empirical science and that Theory A is what Nietzsche should be interpreted as saying. He notes, "to the extent [Theory A] is not vindicated by empirical research—the verdict is plainly out—then the argument from interpretative charity may ultimately cut the other way."<sup>30</sup> The unit in question here is Nietzsche's philosophical commitment, what we "read Nietzsche as committed to,"<sup>31</sup> not the meanings of his words. As I read him, Leiter knows, he thinks, what Nietzsche's words meant—they support, in different passages, two different, incompatible theories. If our interest were in explaining what Nietzsche said, then presumably we could leave things there: he says two different things. But Nietzsche's final philosophical

commitment is still up for grabs, because the *truth* is still up for grabs and charity seems to dictate, for Leiter, first that there *is* a final commitment for Nietzsche and, second, that the final commitment is to the *truer* of those two options he expresses. Hence the mode of charity is truth, but not just truth in so far as it could have been reasonably available to Nietzsche. It includes information that is discovered in the future—information unavailable to Nietzsche. If charity were a means to understand what Nietzsche, himself, was committed to, then this would be extremely odd, because it suggests that discoveries lying in the future relative to an author at the time of writing (here, discoveries in experimental psychology) can retrospectively tell us what that author was committed to. Clearly, there is a commitment to Nietzsche's being *right* that goes well beyond ordinary, everyday interpretation of a speaker's meaning or to any shared philosophical commitment: try going to a betting shop, betting on two different horses in a two-horse race and then, when the race is over, arguing that *all* your money should be interpreted as having been placed on the winning horse. The strength of charity applied here is forceful beyond any reasonable claim to be getting to what Nietzsche thought.

Leiter's use of charity is not universal, as our discussion of mode and strength makes clear. Anderson, endorsing a milder form of charity, suggests moving away from taking what *we* think is true as the yardstick.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, there is evidence that Leiter's view is not unique. Nadeem Hussain discusses a philosophical view, represented in present-day philosophy, and ascribed to Nietzsche by some interpreters with whom he disagrees. The view in question is, he claims, "very, very controversial [i.e., in 2012]. It is hardly the kind of dominant philosophical view that one feels some pressure to ascribe to Nietzsche on grounds of charity. This is only made worse by the fact that [the authors] do not give us any arguments for thinking this view is true, let alone give compelling textual evidence for ascribing it to Nietzsche."<sup>33</sup> Hussain, or at least his imagined interlocutor, supposes that

charity is a pressure we feel to ascribe—to Nietzsche—currently “dominant philosophical view[s]”: note that charity is a separate consideration from arguing for the truth of the view and separate, again, from “compelling textual evidence.” Again, charity’s strength is considerable: Hussain’s point cannot be that no philosopher could seriously hold the view in question, because he acknowledges that some contemporary philosophers do. His point is that many (or, perhaps, better) philosophers reject it. If charity were the means to get to what the historical figure meant, could one really argue (as some seem to do)<sup>34</sup> that, just because *Hussain’s* favoured view is itself problematic, charity encourages us to look elsewhere for the view that is *Nietzsche’s*? It is far from obvious why that supposed fact ought to pressure us at all, unless we take, as a premise, that Nietzsche got things right, whatever “right” turns out to be, and that we are always running after him.

We might be tempted to conclude, from this, that charity is not, after all, for trying to understand what Nietzsche meant: that, in applying modes of charity which he might not acknowledge, or in applying strengths of charity which soar above what could be expected from any reasonable everyday interaction or even standard philosophical debate, or in assuming that Nietzsche should, other things being equal, be assigned whichever view is currently thought best, using arguments and evidence he did not know, philosophical interpreters effectively agree that what Nietzsche really said and meant is not terribly important to them. As philosophers, what matters is the philosophy. “Nietzsche,” on this view, is the label, not for one historical person, but for a kind of dynamic zone of thought. Interpreters argue with each other about what belongs in this zone, where what Nietzsche might have said and thought is a strong consideration, but considerations also include lots of other things that people have thought about since, and especially what the participants think amounts to good philosophy. The principle of charity is not a way to get to the meaning of a historical text, but a license to bring ever more richness to the Nietzsche-zone as our thinking

develops over time. A Nietzsche-zone such as this accounts for the creative, sophisticated philosophical work done in Nietzsche's name, while also allowing for the actual function of charity, at least in some of its incarnations. It might even help us turn a blind eye to occasional misreporting, so long as it enriches the Nietzsche-zone.

But I am doubtful, first, whether this is how we see ourselves and, second, whether it is how we ought to see ourselves. First, not many books and papers are presented in this way. True, *some* analytic interpreters are reasonably clear that Nietzsche may not, perhaps even probably did not, mean what they claim on his behalf—at least in any final sense.<sup>35</sup> I have no objection in such cases, but they are relatively rare. If those who do not say so explicitly nonetheless agree with such descriptions, we would be entitled, at least, to ask for a little more clarity and direction. After all, the desire to know what Nietzsche, himself, really actually said, meant and thought—warts, ambiguities, interpretative dilemmas, deep inconsistencies and all—rather than what currently occupies the Nietzsche-zone, is a perfectly legitimate desire. It is legitimate, that is, even if that means being exposed to the real Nietzsche's "bad" philosophy. To say this is not to say that there is some easy, value-free way to explain the real Nietzsche's philosophy, or even that he himself had one, clear view: but I do say that, as in the misreporting cases, there are ways to get Nietzsche *wrong* and we can see that charity—at least in many of the stronger forms in which it is applied to him—is going to do just that.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, unless we are explicit about our method and purpose (which, I have argued, we are not), I think appealing to the principle of charity in this way is an odd thing to do. Consider this: why not just remove these philosophical views from the Nietzsche-zone and present them as your own views, in your own voice with your own arguments (perhaps giving Nietzsche an honorable mention)? It might feel safer or be more expedient to hide them behind a famous name, but I think neither of these motivations is very

good (or very flattering) and I find it hard to believe that they account for what is going on. *Prima facie*, a better reason for not presenting some philosophical views as your own might be that you don't agree with them. But that, in a sense, is even more peculiar: you offer the "best" Nietzsche, which is not the real Nietzsche, one with which *even you* do not agree—rendering the Nietzsche-zone an uncomfortable middle ground which, on your own view, offers neither the best philosophy around, nor the best interpretation of Nietzsche's meaning. The interpreter might respond that it is nonetheless productive to construct, for herself, a philosophical "other," a kind of Nietzsche-inspired interlocutor with whom she productively disagrees; still, I do not see why she cannot be explicit that this Nietzsche-inspired or "Nietzschean" interlocutor is distinct from Nietzsche himself. It is these sorts of considerations which make me inclined to assume that many users of the principle of charity would prefer to see it as offering genuine access to Nietzsche's meaning. With this assumption in place, we are led back to the ambiguities and concerns with which we began.

Charity is an oft-used, yet under-analysed tool of the trade. Far from bridging meaning and best philosophy, it often functions to favor a certain philosophical position and to make it seem like Nietzsche's meaning follows automatically in the wake. It does not. I do not claim to offer rules for the best interpretation of a philosopher. But those who employ the "principle of charity" do. Used unthinkingly, this is not only misleading; it is misleading in a way which, potentially, violates Nietzsche's texts in much the same way that misreporting does in that it gives credibility to an interpretation by making it seem as though the meaning is respected, when in fact it is not. To borrow from Nietzsche's Beethoven: it is we who have to listen to our Nietzsche—our "third thing"—and we should take care how we produce him. The point of this paper is to begin a more systematic conversation about what such care involves.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See Hans-Johann Glock, “Analytic Philosophy and History: A Mismatch?,” *Mind* 117.468 (2008): 867–97.

<sup>3</sup> See Lorna Finlayson, *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 70.

<sup>4</sup> See Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> R. Lanier Anderson, “Overcoming Charity: The Case of Maudemarie Clark’s *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 25 (1996) 307–41, 336; Ken Gemes, “Life’s Perspectives” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 553–75, 556.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Thomas, “Nietzsche and Moral Fictionalism,” in *Nietzsche, Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. Christopher Janaway and Simon Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133–57, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Philipse, “How Are We to Interpret Heidegger’s Oeuvre?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63.3 (2001), 573–86, 573; Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Field, “Descartes’ Proof of the Existence of Matter,” *Mind* 94.374 (1985), 244–49, 244.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bennett, “A Note on Interpretation,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 12.4 (1982), 753–55, 755.

<sup>10</sup> That is effectively the approach to *GM* in Elijah Milgram, “Who was Nietzsche’s Genealogist?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75.1 (2007), 92–110, although he does not put it like this.

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<sup>11</sup> G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. H. Zimmern (New York: Dover, 1962), 109, my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Vranas, “Aristotle on the Best Good: Is *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a18–22 Fallacious?” *Phronesis* 50.2 (2005), 116–28, 126.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Jonathan E. Adler, “Charity, Interpretation, Fallacy,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 29.4 (1996), 329–43.

<sup>14</sup> Yitzhak Melamed, “Charitable Interpretations and the Political Domestication of Spinoza, or, Benedict in the Land of Secular Imagination” in *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. M. Laerke, J. Smith and E. Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 258–77, 262.

<sup>15</sup> Gemes, “Life’s Perspectives,” 556.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 1005b.

<sup>17</sup> Melamed, “Charitable Interpretations,” 259.

<sup>18</sup> Melamed, “Charitable Interpretations,” 262–63.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, “Overcoming Charity,” 341.

<sup>20</sup> Finlayson, *The Political is Political*, chap. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 159 on Nietzsche’s “lack of [philosophical] training” leading to “slipshod arguments.”

<sup>22</sup> The following passages are candidates: *TL*; *SE* 8; *HH* 11; *D* 501, 553; *GS* 289, 381; *BGE* 4, 24, 34; *GM* III:24; *TI* “Socrates,” “Reason”; *KSA* 11:34 [195]; 12:7 [63], 9 [97].

<sup>23</sup> *KSA* 12:9 [97]; 13:14 [153].

<sup>24</sup> The phrase is from Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 30.

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<sup>25</sup> All of these are abstracted from real cases, though charity is not explicitly evoked each time. See Gemes, “Life’s Perspectives,” 563n19; on hyperbole, Beatrice Han-Pile, “Transcendental Aspects in Nietzsche” in *The Transcendental Turn*, ed. S. Gardner and M. Grist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 195–227, 223; on “sloppy phrasing,” Paul Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 252; Milgram, “Who was Nietzsche’s Genealogist?,” 97; and, on apparently bad philosophy and signs to the reader generally, Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, *The Soul of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). (On the latter, see my review in *Mind* 123.489 (2014): 198–203.)

<sup>26</sup> *TI* “Errors” 1–2; *KSA* 6, pp. 88–89.

<sup>27</sup> This is a point about how charity is actually practised and therefore about which assumptions are present, undiscussed. Though I have never seen this happen, there is nothing in principle to prevent an interpreter from claiming, *via* the appropriate selection of mode, that it is more “charitable” to treat Nietzsche as ambiguous.

<sup>28</sup> The quotations in my illustrations are fictional, not direct (with the exception of the fourth). The illustrations are adapted and simplified from what I take to be genuine cases of misreporting, although readers must judge for themselves. See, respectively: Han-Pile, “Transcendental Aspects in Nietzsche,” 218; Paul Katsafanas on *BGE* 230 in “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 726–55, 747; Bernard Reginster on *GM* I:13 in *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 130; and Gemes on *BGE* 200 in “Life’s Perspectives,” 566.

<sup>29</sup> Misreporting bothers us, I would assume, even if we think the thoughts, as misreported, are *better* than their original, non-misreported counterparts. It bothers us even when those

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thoughts are in fact expressed elsewhere by Nietzsche himself, just not, explicitly, in the cited passage.

<sup>30</sup> Brian Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Theory of the Will” in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, ed. Ken Gemes and Simon May (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107–26, 123n19.

<sup>31</sup> Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Theory of the Will,” 123.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, “Overcoming Charity,” 339.

<sup>33</sup> See Nadeem Hussain, “Metaethics and Nihilism in Reginster’s *The Affirmation of Life*,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43.1 (2012): 99–117, 104, also 111.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, “Nietzsche and Moral Fictionalism.”

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> I would like to thank R. Lanier Anderson, Christian Benne, Sebastian Gardner, Douglas Lavin, Lucy O’Brien, Robert Pippin, Sarah Richmond, Florian Steinberger, Jonny Thakkar and audiences at the North American Nietzsche Society (San Diego, 2014) and the UCL Departmental Seminar for insightful comments on earlier versions. Any inadvertent misreportings are my own.