Nietzsche’s reception by, and influence on, the Frankfurt School takes both direct and indirect forms – and is marked by wide variation between different thinkers and generations. In this chapter, my focus will be restricted to Nietzsche’s direct influence and reception, and primarily to his reception by, influence on and salience for Adorno and Horkheimer, on the one hand, and Habermas, on the other. It would, however, be remiss not at least to acknowledge that Nietzsche’s work is fundamental for thinkers such as Weber, Simmel and Freud, all of whose works are significant influences on, and resources for, the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory – and hence that a fully adequate intellectual history of Nietzsche’s significance for the Frankfurt School would need to address the indirect as well as direct routes of this relationship. The rationale for the more restricted focus of this chapter is that the contrasting relationships of the early and later Frankfurt School to Nietzsche also reveal a central tension within the Frankfurt School between two distinct approaches to the tasks of critical theory.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s Reception of Nietzsche

Max Weber’s contention that intellectual honesty in the social sciences requires that we acknowledge and come to terms with the challenges posed by Marx and Nietzsche is one that Adorno’s philosophy endorses. The twin poles represented by Marx and Nietzsche may fairly be said to demarcate the force field within which Adorno’s engagement with modernity is actualized – and while Marx’s materialist view of history remains central to Adorno’s thought, it is arguably Nietzsche’s example that more fundamentally shapes the style and much of the character of Adorno’s own work. As he comments in Problems of Moral Philosophy: “of all the so-called great philosophers I owe him [Nietzsche] by far the largest debt” (2000: 172). What is the character of this debt – and what are the limits of Nietzsche’s influence on Adorno? Commenting on what he terms the Frankfurt School’s “Nietzschean moment,” Wiggerhaus notes that

Adorno seeks to correct or supplement Marx through the use of Nietzsche as a thinker concerned with the “totality of happiness [Glück] incarnate.” Horkheimer ultimately supported him, seeing in Nietzsche a critic of the “entire [bourgeois] culture of satiety [Genügsamkeitskultur].”

(2001: 144)
Whether Nietzsche is sensibly construed as a thinker concerned with the “totality of happiness incarnate” is very much open to question, but there is little doubt that Adorno sees Nietzsche as both a critic of modern bourgeois culture and, more importantly, one who provides resources for criticism that are missing from Marxist thought:

Nietzsche is uniquely important because he denounced the presence of the bad in good and thereby also criticized the way in which the bad has assumed concrete form within the positive institutions of society and, above all, in the different ideologies. … And the critique he has provided has been far more subtle and specific than, for example, Marxist theory, which has condemned ideologies en bloc, but has never succeeded in entering into their inner workings, their lies, as deeply as Nietzsche.

(Adorno, 2000: 172)

At the same time, Adorno argues that even as it surpasses Marxist analysis in this respect, Nietzsche’s critical insight is also limited in a way that Marxist analysis is not:

Nietzsche failed to recognize that the so-called slave morality that he excoriates is in truth always a master morality, namely, the morality imposed on the oppressed by the rulers. If his critique had been as consistent as it ought to have been, but isn’t – because he was too in thrall to existing social conditions, because he was able to get to the bottom of what people had become, but was not able to get to the bottom of the society that made them what they are – it should have turned its gaze to the conditions that determine human beings and make them and each of us into what we are.

(2000: 174)

It should be noted that this is a somewhat restricted reading of Nietzsche in at least two respects. First, there is a cogent reading of slave morality as a morality articulated by a fraction of the noble class – the priests – that serves their interests in their conflict with the dominant knightly or warrior fraction of the noble class, recruiting slaves and lower classes into an ideological outlook that privileges the authority of the priests (Reginster, 1997). Second, Nietzsche is much more attentive to the interaction of social, economic and political power and cultural subject formation than this portrayal would suggest (Owen, 2005). Yet, despite these limitations, Adorno’s reading of Nietzsche as an astute cultural critic who provides perspicacious analyses of modern society but cannot grasp the structural dynamics through which this society is reproduced is not unreasonable – and this has particularly important implications for why Adorno sees the need to integrate what he sees as valuable in Nietzsche’s work into a wider Hegelian-Marxist framework in order to overcome what he sees as the limitations of Nietzsche’s own prognosis and prescription for addressing the ills of modernity. I’ll return to this latter point toward the end of the section, but before doing so, we need to delve deeper into the question of Nietzsche’s influence on Adorno’s own critical project. It will be helpful here to begin by reflecting on Horkheimer’s 1936 essay “Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era” to which Adorno refers in his 1963 lectures on the problems of moral philosophy as a cogent explication of the dialectic revealed in Nietzsche’s thought and which is rather clearer than the discussion of Nietzsche shaped by it in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1969).

In Daybreak, Nietzsche identified his project of reevaluation as, at least in part, the rehabilitation of those motivations and forms of conduct that “morality” condemned as
expressive of egoism: “we shall restore to men their goodwill towards the actions decried as
egoistic and restore to these actions their value – we shall deprive them of their bad conscience!”
(1997a: 93). To contextualize this exclamation, consider Kant whose stance is stated succ-
cinctly in the section on “Egoism” in Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View:

the moral egoist limits all purposes to himself; as a eudaemonist, he concentrates the
highest motives of his will merely on profit and his own happiness, but not on the
concept of duty. Because every other person has a different concept of what he
counts as happiness, it is exactly egoism which causes him to have no touchstone
of a genuine concept of duty which truly must be a universally valid principle. All
eudaemonists are consequently egoists.

(Kant, 2006: 12)

Morality conceived as a system of duties grounded in the categorical imperative excludes
such self-love; it opposes itself to, and asserts a right to rule over, the sensuous nature of
human beings. Horkheimer’s engagement with this topic aims to situate morality’s rejection
of egoism and Nietzsche’s critical response to it within a historical account of the rise and
triumph of the bourgeoisie.

Horkheimer identifies the poles of the modern (bourgeois) anthropology of man in terms
of a pessimistic image of man as ruled by bestial instincts – untrustworthy, selfish, prone to
violence and evil – and an optimistic image of man in terms of compassion, empathy and
a natural tendency to social harmony. And yet despite their opposed accounts of human
nature, Horkheimer remarks,

A closer look at the optimistic and pessimistic trends … reveals a trait common to
the two ways of thinking as they developed in history, which drastically diverted
and weakened the focus of knowledge of man so strong in Machiavelli and the
Enlightenment: the condemnation of egoism, indeed of pleasure itself. Both in the
cynical proclamation of the dangerous wickedness of human nature which had
to be kept in check by a strong government apparatus, and in the corresponding
Puritanical doctrine of the sinfulness of the individual, who had to suppress his own
desires with iron discipline and in absolute subjection to the law of duty, as well as
in the contrary assertion of man’s originally pure and harmonious nature which is
disturbed only by the restrictive and corrupt present conditions, the absolute renun-
ciation of every egoistic urge is the self-evident basis.

(1982: 12)

This commonality stands in stark contradiction to the demands of everyday practice:

The more purely bourgeois society comes to power, the more its influence overcomes
restrictions, men oppose each other with increasing hostility and indifference as
individuals, families, economic groups, and classes. In the context of the sharpened
economic and social contradiction, the originally progressive principle of free com-
petition takes on the character of a permanent state of war, internally and exter-
nally. All who are drawn into this world develop the egoistic, exclusionary, hostile
sides of their being in order to survive in a hard reality. In the bourgeoisie’s great
historically effective anthropological views, however, any emotions or drives which
do not contribute directly to concord, love, and sociability are despised, distorted,
or denied.

(1982: 12)
Under capitalist society, egoism is both practically cultivated and, at the same time, must be condemned and denied: it is the (self-)love that cannot speak its name: “What is expressed in philosophy as the contempt for instinctual desires turns out in real life to be the practice of their repression” (Horkheimer, 1982: 13). Capitalism requires idealistic morality on the basis of both a general social interest and a class interest. The former, which this morality expresses in distorted form, “lies in the social need to restrain the principle of competition in the epoch dominated by it” (Horkheimer, 1982: 14). The latter in the role of morality enables social domination: for the masses “morality was supposed to mean subservience, resignation, discipline and sacrifice for the whole, i.e., simply the repression of their material claims” (Horkheimer, 1982: 14). More specifically, the emergence of liberal capitalist states that remove the fetters of feudal rule introduces new freedoms for the individual, but, at the same time, a “conscience has to be indoctrinated into him. By fighting for the bourgeois freedoms, he must at the same time learn to fight against himself” (Horkheimer, 1982: 20):

All instincts which did not move in predesignated channels, every unconditional desire for happiness was persecuted and repressed in favor of “moral” strivings related to the “common good” and to the extent that this common good contradicted the most immediate interests of most individuals, the transference of psychic energies into socially permitted forms lacked any rational explanation, and society needed an education dominated by religion and metaphysics in addition to physical force in order to domesticate the masses.

(Horkheimer, 1982: 16)

It is against this background that Horkheimer claims that the “struggle against egoism goes further than single desires; it applies to emotional life as a whole and ultimately turns against any unrationlized, free pleasure which is sought without justification” (Horkheimer, 1982: 16).

This ascetic morality leads, on Horkheimer's account, to nihilism conceived (in a more restricted sense than what he takes to be Nietzsche's own view) as “the secret self-contempt of the individual on the basis of the contradiction between bourgeois ideology and reality” (Horkheimer, 1982: 52, fn.136). The individual within the mass reflects on himself in terms of the humanist view of dignity as grounded in the ability to act freely as this is mediated through ascetic morality and, at the same time, is confronted with an everyday reality of exposure to natural and social forces beyond his control. This leads to

a secret contempt for one's own concrete existence and to hatred for the happiness of others, to a nihilism which has expressed itself again and again in the history of the modern age as the practical destruction of everything joyful and happy, as barbarity and destruction.

(Horkheimer, 1982: 52)

The stated salience of Nietzsche for Horkheimer's argument is that Nietzsche is the most significant of a limited number of thinkers who have sought to rehabilitate egoism. The central importance of this move for Horkheimer is that in acting as an advocate for egoism, Nietzsche (and fellow travelers such as Mandeville, Helvetius and de Sade) reveals the peculiar fact that when “they traced down the condemned drives and raised them to consciousness without rejection or minimalization, these powers lost their demonic power” (Horkheimer, 1982: 59). Indeed, Horkheimer concludes,
By their own existence these psychologists seem to point out that the liberation from ascetic morality with its nihilistic consequences can bring about a human change in the opposite sense than internalization. This process, which abolishes it, does not cast man back to the previous, psychic stage, as it were, as if that first process had never taken place, but brings it to a higher form of life. … Insofar as mankind … enters a higher era, it will change reality and quickly acquire the freer psychic constitution such as the great number of strugglers and martyrs for that general transformation already have without psychological mediation, because the dark, happiness-denying ethos of a dying epoch no longer has any power over them.

(1982: 60)

There are two points to Horkheimer's positive appreciation of Nietzsche. The first is that once we acknowledge these drives as part of the natural condition of humanity, then they lose the demonic power they otherwise exercise:

When the will to cause suffering ceases to act “in the name” of “God,” in the name of justice, morality, honor, or the nation, it loses, by means of self-knowledge, the terrible power it exercises as long as it is hidden by its own carrier because of an ideological denial. It is taken up into the economy of real-life conduct for what it is and becomes rationally masterable.

(1982: 59)

In denying the possibility of innocent expressions of self-love, morality demonizes drives that are a constitutive part of the human condition and hence the possibility of a form of social existence that acknowledges and channels aggression and the will to cruelty to serve the common good rather than denying and repressing these drives in the name of the common good, a path that leads to nihilism and its social and political expression in barbarism and terror on Horkheimer's account. The second is that the expression of such drives is capable of new higher forms in modernity. Nietzsche neither advocates nor takes as possible a reversion to some primitive natural state; on the contrary, he stresses the spiritualization of the expression of the drives, that is, their expression in cultural forms that we have acquired (for example, one might think of the expression of the erotic drive in love songs or of the drive to cruelty in biting exchanges of social wit).

Yet even as Horkheimer acknowledges these positive features of Nietzsche's project, his essay is itself an extended performance of the key criticism of Nietzsche that he advances. The criticism is this:

His error lies in the present’s lack of historical understanding, which leads him to bizarre hypotheses where clear theoretical knowledge was possible. He was blind to the historical dynamics of his time and hence to the way to his goal; therefore, even his most magnificent analysis, the genealogy of morals and of Christianity, despite all delicate subtlety, turns out to be too crude.

(1982: 59)

Horkheimer's essay presents itself as offering the kind of analysis that Nietzsche's fails to provide and, in doing so, rearticulates the full expression of the morality of the ascetic ideal as bound to the emergence and development of the bourgeois era. This rewriting of the genealogy of morality thus also refocuses the project of overcoming morality and the more
restricted form of nihilism to which it gives rise on the overcoming of contemporary capitalist society as an economic, social, cultural and moral order.

Horkheimer’s historical-philosophical essay may be seen as articulating the background against which Adorno’s philosophical critique of Kant emerges. It does so because while Horkheimer’s essay offers a diagnosis of bourgeois morality (of which Kant’s moral philosophy is the most sophisticated intellectual expression) as both symptom and support of a social pathology, it does not offer a direct challenge to Kant on the philosophical plane. It is this task that Adorno takes up.

Nietzsche offers a variety of criticisms of “morality” in the sense exemplified by Kant’s moral philosophy, but one central criticism derives from his reflections on the ascetic ideal. In the third essay of On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche offers an account of the ascetic ideal:

The idea at issue […] is the value which the ascetic priests ascribe to our life: they juxtapose this life (along with all that belongs to it, ‘nature’, ‘world’, the whole sphere of becoming and the ephemeral) to a completely different form of existence, which it opposes and excludes, unless it somehow turns itself against itself, denies itself. In which case, the case of an ascetic life, life functions as a bridge to that other existence. (2008: 96)

This ideal offers “a closed system of will, goal and interpretation” that expresses “an unsatisfied instinct and will to power which seeks not to master some isolated aspect of life but rather life itself” (2008: 96). What accounts for the triumph of the ascetic ideal on Nietzsche’s account is that it provides a way of making sense of suffering:

Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the animal man, had no meaning up to now. … The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning! Up to now it was the only meaning, but any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all; the ascetic ideal was, in every respect, the ultimate ‘faute de mieux’ par excellence. Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. The interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of guilt… But in spite of all that – man was saved, he had a meaning, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of ‘non-sense’; from now on he could will something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the will itself was saved. (2008: 162)

There are a number of features of Nietzsche’s analysis that are salient for Adorno’s critique of moral philosophy as exemplified by the figure of Kant, but central to it is a feature that Nietzsche stresses in his critique of the ascetic ideal, namely, the radical opposition it constructs – and must construct to secure the kind of authority that it claims – between the rational will and sensuous nature:

It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that whole willing that derives its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion
Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School

against the most fundamental prerequisites of life, but it is and remains a will!…

And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to will the void than void the will…

(2008: 162, translation adjusted)

Kant’s philosophical achievement for Nietzsche is to give this radical opposition its most systematic intellectual expression – and Adorno accepts and adopts this view in advancing an account of Kant’s moral philosophy as combining rigorism and repression in its denial of any role for our sensuous nature in either the construction or motivation of morality (Adorno, 2000: 71–75). As Freyenhagen notes, Adorno sees Kant’s denial of moral worth to motivations arising from affects as a logical product of the systematic view that such motivations are heteronomous with respect to freedom and hence to morality (Freyenhagen, 2013: 103):

In order to save the idea of moral worth, we need the pure, transcendental ego – removed from moral luck, from the contingencies of what our sensuous nature endows us with, and from what the external world makes out of our well-intentioned best efforts in terms of consequences. However, honouring freedom by cleansing it of everything empirical – Adorno objects – is at the same time to introduce an element of unfreedom into its very heart; specifically it introduces repression into the workings of freedom. In other words, freedom is purchased at the price of dominating our sensuous nature.

(Freyenhagen, 2013: 104)

Put in more concrete social terms, Adorno’s claim is that “a supreme metaphysical principle has been created out of the idea of the emancipation of the bourgeois individual” (Adorno, 2000: 71). Apart from its general acceptance of Nietzsche’s critique of the ascetic ideal as mediated through Horkheimer’s rearticulation of this critique, Adorno’s criticism involves two further points that draw on Nietzsche. First, Adorno shares Nietzsche’s skepticism toward the presumption that universal moral responsibility is well motivated. What appears progressive may disclose a desire to blame and punish that has the ideological function of masking a social problem by individualizing responsibility (Freyenhagen, 2013: 106). Second, there is a Nietzschean question about whether the price (in repression) exacted for the achievement of moral agency is worth it. As Freyenhagen notes, Kant does allow that the fact that human beings are empirical beings who have a sensuous nature and, as such, are necessarily happiness-seeking beings can act as an indirect constraint on morality in the sense that being rationally motivated to act morally requires that we can hold to the thought that acting morally and achieving happiness are, in the final instance, reconciled. As Adorno puts it,

Kant finally concedes that the world would be a hell if it were not possible to achieve – and were it only in a transcendental realm – something like the unity of reason and the impulses it has suppressed.


To ground this possibility, Kant posits as res fidei the existence of freedom of the will, immortality of the soul, and God – but in doing so he thereby opens up the space for a critique of morality. Nietzsche’s contention that if, after Darwin, we are intellectually honest, we cannot hold to these articles of faith, leaves us with an account of morality and a system of moral values that we cannot truthfully endorse and, hence, exposes us to the threat of nihilism. It is, in part, this predicament that leads both Nietzsche and Adorno to the task
of seeking to articulate an understanding of freedom and hence of ethics that overcomes the radical opposition constructed by the ascetic ideal between man's rational and sensuous nature.

However, while Adorno’s critique of Kant exhibits recognizably Nietzschean elements, Adorno is also critical of Nietzsche's own response to the predicament that he diagnoses so acutely. This critique is less focused on the values that Nietzsche proposes than on what Adorno's takes to be the fact that these values simply cannot be practically realized except “on Sunday afternoons” under contemporary conditions (Adorno, 2000: 173) – and he echoes Horkheimer's point that Nietzsche lacks an adequate grasp of historical dynamics and of social structures. Yet despite this, Nietzsche provides a critical model for Adorno and Horkheimer. Nietzsche's attack on the Bismarckian Kulturstaat may be seen by Adorno and Horkheimer as a limited and partial precursor to their reflections on the Culture Industry, while the influence of On the Genealogy of Morals on the form and style of Dialectic of Enlightenment is pervasive. This latter point is particularly so in respect of the third essay of the Genealogy on the meaning of ascetic ideals in which Nietzsche gives an account of how an instrumental relation to life emerges tied to a totalizing conception of the good and poses the question of nihilism as the prospect of such an instrumental rationality now divorced from any conception of the good.

Nietzsche's own turn to an expressionist understanding of human agency as exemplified by the figure of the artist is an attempt to rescue reason (and freedom) from its own self-undermining (Ridley, 2007a), where this commitment is not stated but rather shown in the textual performance of the Genealogy (Owen, 2007), and one can plausibly advance the same claim concerning Dialectic of Enlightenment in which the self-undermining of reason as instrumental rationality is displayed and the alternative understanding of reason is not stated but performed through the text. Perhaps this points to a final deep point of connection between Nietzsche and Adorno, namely, that their works are compositions (in the full artistic, and particularly musical, sense of that term), and grasping this point means understanding what these works are doing in the way that we understand what a work of art is doing – and in both cases reflection on this topic is central to their philosophical projects not simply because they take the domain of art and culture to be central to human experience but also because getting clear about how we understand art works is, at the same time, clarifying the character of their own philosophical activity.

**Habermas’ Engagement with Nietzsche**

The contrast between the reception of Nietzsche by Adorno and Horkheimer, and that of Habermas is somewhat stark, at least if we focus on the reading that Habermas’ offers in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (to which I will return). However, at an earlier stage in his prodigious career, Habermas had engaged with less polemical intent with Nietzsche's work in an essay published as Habermas’ Nachwort to an edition of Nietzsche's epistemological writings, this essay being largely (but not wholly) a repetition of the final chapter of Habermas' Knowledge and Human Interests published in the same year (1968) – and I'll begin by considering this initial engagement of Habermas' with Nietzsche's theory of knowledge.

Habermas' engagement with Nietzsche's epistemological writings is related to Habermas' own project in Knowledge and Human Interests to demonstrate both the unity of the relation of knowledge and human interests, and to argue that we can distinguish distinct modalities of knowledge in terms of the interests that they serve. Habermas' book is an extended defense of self-reflection against the dogmatic claim of scientism that the only genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge (and its philosophical expression in the doctrine of positivism); a defense that distinguishes the empirical-analytic sciences as serving our technical interest in
mastery of our environment expressed as instrumental rationality, the historico-hermeneutic sciences as serving our practical interest in mutual understanding expressed as communicative rationality and critical theory as serving our emancipatory interest in overcoming arbitrary constraints expressed as ideology-critique (Habermas, 2004). It is in relation to this project that Habermas addresses Nietzsche’s reflections on knowledge, and it is intelligible that he should do so since Nietzsche takes knowledge and human interests to be necessarily intertwined.

Habermas’ engagement starts by considering the second of Nietzsche’s Untimely Meditations, “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life,” in which Nietzsche rejects “positivist” approaches to the study of history in the context of a wider consideration of the different interests that human beings have in history and the different modes of historical understanding:

History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance. This threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history – insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a monumental, an antiquarian and a critical species of history.

(1997b: 67)

Habermas summarizes Nietzsche’s view before introducing the claim that, in contrast to the critique of positivist historiography advanced by the hermeneutic approach associated with Dilthey, Nietzsche’s critique “directs itself not against the false scientific self-understanding of contemporary history but rather against history as science” (Habermas, 2004: 54). Nietzsche, Habermas contends, “brings his demand to history from without: it should win back its meaning for life praxis by divesting itself of a straightjacket of scientific methodology, ceasing to be a strict science, even at the price of losing possible objectivity” (2004: 55). It is somewhat unclear what the grounds of this claim are meant to be. Nietzsche’s attack on positivist historiography and its attendant conception of “objectivity” is grounded in the claim that history is integrally tied to human interests and, hence, that any approach to history that imagines that it can and should be divorced from any connection to human interests, that it can and should be “purely disinterested,” is both conceptually incoherent and practically self-deceived, where this is precisely a “false scientistic self-understanding of contemporary history” and one that, Nietzsche contends, has pathological cultural effects. Hence, Nietzsche’s scornful remark about “naive historians” who “call the assessment of the opinions and deeds of the past according to the everyday standards of the present moment ‘objectivity’: it is here they discover the canon of all truth” (1997b: 90) and his deeper point against the positivist understanding of “objectivity”:

According to this interpretation, the word means a condition in the historian which permits him to observe an event in all its motivations and consequences so purely that it has no effect at all on his own subjectivity: it is analogous to that aesthetic phenomenon of detachment from personal interest with which a painter sees in a stormy landscape with thunder and lightning, or a rolling sea, only the picture of them within him, the phenomenon of complete absorption in the things themselves: it is a superstition, however, that the picture which these things evoke in a man possessing such a disposition is a true reproduction of the empirical nature of the things themselves. Or is it supposed that at this moment the things as it were engrave, counterfeit, photograph themselves by their own action on a purely passive medium?

(1997b: 91)
This is, as Nietzsche remarks, “mythology, and bad mythology at that” (1997b: 91). The point is important because it establishes a connection between Nietzsche’s essay and the mature position that he will come to articulate and that is the true target of Habermas’ critical focus, namely, Nietzsche’s perspectivism.

Having identified what he takes to be a problem with Nietzsche’s view in the second Untimely Meditation, Habermas proposes that Nietzsche finds himself in the position of needing to prove the very possibility of knowledge oriented to action and, hence,

had to go back radically behind the scientizing conception of the world in order to conceive knowledge as such as opposed to every objectivism, even the scientistic illusion of objectivism, on the basis of its preceding and inalienable connection with praxis.

(2004: 55)

Habermas finds the seeds of this “radical critique of knowledge” in Nietzsche’s earlier essay “On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense” which he identifies with Nietzsche’s development of a naturalized Kantianism in which Nietzsche transposes Kant’s question “how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?” into another: “Why is belief in synthetic a priori judgments necessary?” Nietzsche proposes this transposition as part of a quasi-evolutionary story of human epistemic capacities in which he holds that the fact that we, human beings, deploy a range of categories (e.g., those for which Kant provides a transcendental deduction) to represent the world gives us no reason to hold the “real world” corresponds to the world as it appears to us and, hence, no reason to accept a metaphysical conception of truth. However, Habermas takes Nietzsche to draw a more radical claim: “Nietzsche concludes that not only the correspondence theory of truth but also the concept of truth as such is useless” (2004: 61).

It is certainly true that Nietzsche is, in the first half of the 1880s, committed to a view that denies the metaphysical version of the correspondence theory of truth and that he uses this conception of truth rhetorically to draw out the view that, judged by this standard, all judgments are false – and, hence, raise the threat of nihilism. However, it is certainly false to hold that this is the position expressed by Nietzsche’s perspectivism. To state, as Habermas does, that Nietzsche denies any distinction between knowledge and illusion or rejects the very concept of truth is to fail to recognize the development of Nietzsche’s philosophical position across his work. Consider Nietzsche’s aphorism in Twilight of the Idols “How the ‘Real World’ at last became a myth” in which he sketches out a history of the metaphysical distinction between real and apparent worlds. The relevant sections run thus:

3. The real world, unattainable, undemonstrable, cannot be promised, but even when merely thought of a consolation, a duty, an imperative.
   (Fundamentally the same old sun, but shining through mist and scepticism; the idea grown sublime, pale, northerly, Konigsbergian.)
4. The real world - unattainable? Unattained, at any rate. And if unattained also unknown. Consequently also no consolation, no redemption, no duty: how could we have a duty towards something unknown?
   (The grey dawn. First yawnings of reason. Cockcrow of positivism.)
5. The ‘real world’ - an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer - an idea grown useless, superfluous, consequently a refuted idea: let us abolish it!
   (Broad daylight; breakfast; return of cheerfulness and bons sens; Plato blushes for shame; all free spirits run riot.)
6. We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? ... But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world! (Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; INCIPIIT ZARATHUSTRA)

(Nietzsche, 1990: 50–51)

Whereas Kant stands at (3) on Nietzsche’s account in which the noumenal realm, although unknowable, is posited and plays a pivotal role in Kant’s critical system and account of morality, Nietzsche at varied points of his philosophical career occupies positions (4), (5) and finally (6) (for a clear account, see Clark, 1991). The importance of this point is twofold. First, Nietzsche’s perspectivism represents position (6) in which, far from dropping the distinction between knowledge and illusion, he is able to give a coherent account of how knowledge is integrally tied to human interests (expressed as affects) in which such interests/affects are the condition of possibility of knowledge: all knowledge is affect dependent (Janaway, 2007). Second, this entitles Nietzsche to the concept of truth and the distinction between truth and illusion that he, indeed, consistently deploys. (And to ward off another possible misunderstanding to which Habermas seems prone, we should note that Nietzsche’s claim is not that a perspective determines what is true, but rather that it governs what is up for grabs as true or false.) One reason that these reflections on Habermas’ misreading of Nietzsche matter is that recognizing the limitations and errors of Habermas’ account also brings the recognition that Nietzsche offers a much more powerful alternative to Habermas’ own account of the relation of knowledge and human interests than otherwise appears.

Habermas returns to Nietzsche in 1985 in his polemical text The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, which appears to be motivated by the concern that Nietzschean strands in contemporary philosophy (Adorno and Horkheimer, Heidegger, Derrida, Bataille, Foucault) are inadvertently enabling neocorporative politics by undermining the unfinished project of enlightenment. This text is, in certain respects, continuous with the earlier engagement, but the stakes are pitched higher. Habermas takes Nietzsche to be committed to an irrationalist rejection of reason, freedom and truth:

Nietzsche had no choice but to submit subject-centered reason yet again to an immanent critique – or to give up the program entirely. Nietzsche opts for the second alternative: He renounces a renewed revision of the concept of reason and bids farewell to the dialectic of enlightenment.

(Habermas, 1987: 85–86)

Habermas seeks to support this claim through a reading of Nietzsche in which reason is reduced to power through a series of steps:

1. The art critic is the model of all evaluation (1987: 123).
2. All validity claims are reduced to evaluations (1987: 123–124).
3. All evaluations are reduced to subjective preferences as expressions of power (1987: 124).
4. A standard is posited that distinguishes active and reactive forms of power (1987: 125).
5. This is “grounded” in a genealogy that operates on the principle: “What is older is earlier in the generational chain and nearer to the origin. The more primordial is considered the more worthy of honor, the preferable, the more unspoiled, the purer. It is deemed better” (1987: 125–126).

This is the argument that Habermas takes to underwrite his earlier claim concerning Nietzsche’s irrationalism:
Nietzsche owes his concept of modernity, developed in terms of his theory of power, to an unmasking critique of reasons that sets it outside the horizon of reason. … Nietzsche enthrones taste, ‘the Yes and No of the palate,’ as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil.

(1987: 96, see also 123)

It is difficult to know quite how to approach Habermas’ irrationalist reading of Nietzsche. The thought that origins should be glorified or that the value of phenomena is tied to its origin is one that Nietzsche quite self-consciously rejects throughout his career (see, for example, 2001: 202–203). However, the crux of Habermas’ argument depends on two claims – that aesthetic judgments are irrational and that all judgments are aesthetic judgments (Nehamas, 2004: 257) – so let me address these by way of sketching briefly an alternative account of Nietzsche’s position.

We can start with the point that Nietzsche does take artistic agency to be the model of agency more generally (Ridley, 2007a; Pippin, 2010) and takes art as form-giving to be a general feature of human activity that is present across its varied domains (Ridley, 2007b). It is important however not to misinterpret this “aestheticism” since it is not a matter of treating all judgments in terms of aesthetic criteria (i.e., judging an ethical action in terms of its beauty) but rather of treating the form of judging as relevantly similar to that of aesthetic judgment in the sense that the relevant standards of judgment are not fixed independently and in advance of the performance. The actor is embedded in practices that have a history, whose standards of judgment have been developed and transformed across that history through the performances that compose it and, hence, are not fixed independently and in advance of current performances but, rather, can be developed and transformed through these performances. This is easily seen in the case of the history of art, and Nietzsche’s proposal is that the same point is true for practices more generally, including epistemic and ethical practices. (On this point, despite their other differences, Nietzsche and Hegel are arguably close.) At the same time, these performances can exhibit or fail to exhibit salient virtues of the practice; thus, Nietzsche’s position concerning, for example, epistemic claims is akin to that of virtue epistemologists in that he takes it that the exercise of intellectual virtues (such as Redlichkeit) are conditions of being entitled to knowledge claims.

Yet what count as the salient virtues may also be misconstrued within the practice such that the actors misunderstand their own activity – for example, they may suppose that pure disinterested contemplation is, per impossible, the appropriate disposition for epistemic purposes. The problem that Nietzsche then confronts is this:

1. He takes it that modern culture is ignoble and systematically misunderstands its own activity.
2. He cannot appeal to any substantive conception of the good to ground this judgment because he denies (“the death of God”) that we can hold any such standard.

The doctrine of will to power is a response to this problem. We can sketch this doctrine briefly thus:

a) Human agency involves making commitments/pursuing goals.
b) Binding oneself to commitments and/or pursuing goals are challenges and succeeding in meeting these challenges is an achievement characterized by a feeling of power. The more challenging the commitment/goal, the greater the feeling of power on meeting it.
c) To be an agent is thus intrinsically to be committed to acquiring the power to direct one’s own agency (i.e., to make commitments/set and pursue goals) and to meet challenges by overcoming the obstacles to the self-directed exercise of our agency and thereby enhancing one’s capacity for agency. (This is why Nietzsche identifies “will to power” with the “instinct for freedom.”)

Thus,

d) To be an agent is intrinsically to be committed to the cultivation of those virtues (as affective dispositions and practical capacities) that encourage and enable us to direct, exercise and enhance our own agency by taking up and overcoming challenges.

In an ethical culture that values challenging oneself such as the agonal culture of ancient Greece, these virtues (truthfulness, courage, independence of mind, resoluteness, etc.) will be prevalent. Suppose, however, that, for historically contingent reasons (i.e., the rise of Christianity), the values that we acquire through our ethical culture are ones that devalue these virtues and value opposed virtues (such as obedience, humility, and avoidance of suffering), then we have reason to hold that this is an instance of what Nietzsche terms “decadence,” which is the condition that he holds modern culture to exhibit.

This necessarily very brief sketch of an alternative reading of Nietzsche serves here simply as counterpoint to Habermas' rather crude reductionist reading of Nietzsche as an irrationalist. It provides a way of understanding Nietzsche’s project, and the centrality of his concern with art and the aesthetic in that project, which makes plain that the sense in which Nietzsche treats all judgments as aesthetic judgments is not to be confused with the aestheticization of epistemology or ethics but, rather, is a claim about the form of judgment in epistemic and ethical practices. Further, against Habermas’ claim that such judgments are simple expressions of power, it offers a picture in which the conjunction of the feeling of power with the development of one’s powers is a consequence of performing whatever one is doing well, that is, getting one’s scientific experiment right, producing a decent poem or song, outwitting one’s political opponents, etc. This is not the reduction of judgments to preferences – and it does indeed involve an appeal to intersubjective validity, that is, to the exchange of reasons. My judgment that I have exhibited the relevant virtues in doing the experiment, composing the poem or song and outwitting my political opponents may be mistaken – and this judgment is constitutively open to public affirmation, contestation or rebuttal. However, Nietzsche’s picture also acknowledges that individuals may be differently situated in the space of judgments in terms of their levels of discernment (i.e., the judgment of a connoisseur of painting may reasonably have more weight that of a neophyte). This is, however, as it should be. There are virtuosi (actors) and connoisseurs (spectators), who may not, and often will not, coincide in relation to any domain of human activity: aesthetic, ethical, epistemic, political, etc. Acknowledging that point does not remove us from the realm of reasons, rather it registers that we are located within it. This is the sense in which Habermas is right to say that Nietzsche takes the art critic as the model of the evaluating judgment; it is simply that everything else that Habermas says after that claim takes the significance of this point in exactly the wrong direction. I cannot, in the space available, definitively disprove Habermas’ reading, but two reasons support the kind of alternative picture sketched here. First, the principle of charity suggests that given a choice between two interpretations of a thinker’s work where one makes them appear as an incoherent irrationalist and the other a coherent defender of reason, we would need compelling textual grounds to favor the former, and Habermas’ recourse at key junctures to material from unpublished notebooks (whose status as claims to which Nietzsche is committed is rather dubious) is perhaps telling here.

The second is that the kind of picture I have presented coheres rather better with most of
contemporary Nietzsche scholarship (see, e.g., Gemes & Richardson, 2013). This is not to
deny that there are many disagreements in this scholarship, merely to note that it favors the
kind of picture I have presented, while one would be hard pressed to find any support at all
for Habermas’ reading.

Conclusion

What is at stake in the contrasting reactions of Adorno and Horkheimer, on the one hand,
and Habermas, on the other hand, to Nietzsche’s philosophy? It is true that Adorno and
Horkheimer are considerably more sympathetic to Nietzsche’s criticisms of morality and to
his genealogical mode of investigation than Habermas, but this difference points to a deeper
issue concerning the nature of a critical theory of modern society. Habermas’ project aims to
vindicate a story of progress in which modernity as the unfinished project of enlightenment
discloses the context-transcending universalist standpoint of morality. By contrast, Adorno
offers a darker picture of modernity where the form of a critical theory is one of immanent
criticism that rejects the possibility under the conditions of modern society of establishing
context-transcendent standards of morality. This is not, as it is also not in Nietzsche, a story
of decline but, rather, one of deep ambivalence concerning enlightenment, and it is this am-
biguence that Adorno’s negative dialectics articulates. If the stakes of how Nietzsche relates
to critical theory are high, it is because Nietzsche’s philosophy is one site of the battleground
concerning the very form of a critical theory.

References

(2), pp. 281–305.
Further Reading


