**Truth and perspectivism**

Earlier in the term I discussed Nietzsche’s (at least apparent) anti-realism about value.

1. It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. This poem that we have invented is constantly internalized, drilled, translated into flesh and reality, indeed, into the commonplace, by the so-called practical human beings (our actors). **Whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself according to its nature – nature is always value-less – but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* were the givers and granters!**

(The Gay Science, §301)

Yet Nietzsche helps himself to evaluative and normative claims all of the time. Nietzsche’s second-order denial of value claims is at least in tension with his use of first-order value claims.

This is a value-specific version of Nietzsche’s broader perspectivism:

*Perspectivism*: all **truth** claims are in some sense dependent on the perspective of the person making the claim

An example from Nietzsche’s notebooks:

1. In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—"Perspectivism." It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against*.* Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.

(Included in *The Will to Power* §481)

**Nietzsche’s scepticism**

Bare perspectivism does not necessarily lead to scepticism. To understand Nietzsche’s scepticism, we need to look at his reasons for denying truth.

In *Truth and Lying in a Non-moral sense* (an essay written in 1873 but published only after Nietzsche lost his sanity) Nietzsche argues that our beliefs and truth claims are connected to reality only via a number of inherently distorting processes:

1. What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding

Scepticism about the senses in particular also appears in later work:

1. It is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and not a world-explanation; but insofar as it is based on belief in the senses, it is regarded as more, and for a long time to come must be regarded as more—namely, as an explanation.

(*Beyond Good and Evil* §14)

Sometimes Nietzsche’s scepticism blames language. For example, he repeatedly argues that languages with a subject-predicate grammatical structure mislead us into (falsely) believing in a simple and diachronically identical “self” or “subject”:

1. People used to believe in "the soul" as they believed in grammar and the grammatical subject: people said that "I" was a condition and "think" was a predicate and conditioned - thinking is an activity, and a subject must be thought of as its cause. Now, with admirable tenacity and cunning, people are wondering whether they can get out of this net - wondering whether the reverse might be true: that "think" is the condition and "I" is conditioned, in which case "I" would be a synthesis that only gets produced through thought itself.

(*Beyond Good and Evil* §54)

(For more on this see Han-Pile, B., (2020). ['The Doing is Everything': A Middle-Voiced Reading of Agency In Nietzsche](http://repository.essex.ac.uk/25180/). Inquiry. 63 (1), 42-64)

Sometimes Nietzsche’s scepticism blames concepts as misleading “fictions”. One such concept, for example, is causality:

1. We should not erroneously objectify "cause" and "effect" like the natural scientists do (and whoever else thinks naturalistically these days -) in accordance with the dominant mechanistic stupidity which would have the cause push and shove until it "effects" something; we should use "cause" and "effect" only as pure concepts, which is to say as conventional fictions for the purpose of description and communication, not explanation. In the "in-itself" there is nothing like "causal association," "necessity," or "psychological un-freedom."

(*Beyond Good and Evil* §21)

(There is more about Nietzsche’s specific scepticism about causality in my paper ‘“Pain always asks for a cause”: Nietzsche and Explanation’ *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(4), 2017)

Nietzsche’s various sceptical arguments sometimes support a strong scepticism or error theory (our truth claims and beliefs cannot but be false) and sometimes a weaker or classical scepticism (we have no way of knowing whether what we believe is true).

**Problems for Nietzsche’s Perspectivism**

The combination of Nietzsche’s perspectivism and scepticism generates two problems.

*Consistency problem*: Nietzsche denies that truth claims or beliefs can be true, but everywhere helps himself to truth claims

*Paradox of perspectivism*: Nietzsche: “truth claims and beliefs cannot be true/be known to be true”. Is that true?

**Solution one: the two-level solution**

(See Bernard Reginster, 'The Paradox of Perspectivism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 62, no. 1 (2001): 217-33.

And John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).)

A two-level solution would distinguish two levels of truth claims. Nietzsche’s skepticism applies to one level; his own truth claims lies in the other level, invulnerable to his skepticism.

John Richardson:

* Nietzsche’s perspectivism maintains that all beliefs and claims are limited by the perspective of the knower
* Beliefs limited by perspective are not thereby false, merely false and open to revision
* Revision may be warranted when more perspectives are adopted and more evidence presented
* All of Nietzsche’s own beliefs and truth claims are also open to revision
* But some beliefs are more open to revision than others. Nietzsche’s “will to power” metaphysics is a bedrock principle that is less open to revision than other beliefs that are more easily sacrificed

*Problem*: must reinterpret Nietzsche’s scepticism to render it much less radical. This is difficult to square with Nietzsche’s claims that language, senses, and concepts are inherently misleading (how can more perspectives present more reliable evidence if those perspectives rely on faulty instruments?)

**Solution two: Nietzsche changes his mind**

(See Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

What if the inconsistency is generated by Nietzsche changing his mind over the course of his oeuvre?

Maudemarie Clark:

* Nietzsche’s scepticism relies on two principles:
  + the world as it is in itself is conceivable, but not knowable (neo-Kantian principle)
  + a claim or a belief is not true unless it successfully and accurately refers to a state of affairs that holds regardless of whether we know about it (a correspondence theory of truth)

1. It is true that there might be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it can hardly be disputed. We view all things through the human head and cannot cut this head off; though the question remains, what of the world would still be there if it had been cut off

(Human, All too Human, §9).

* By *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche has abandoned both principles

1. There are still harmless self-observers who believe in the existence of "immediate certainties," such as "I think," or the "I will" that was Schopenhauer's superstition: just as if knowledge had been given an object here to seize, stark naked, as a "thing-in-itself," and no falsification took place from either the side of the subject or the side of the object. But I will say this a hundred times: **"immediate certainty," like "absolute knowledge" and the "thing in itself" contains a contradictio in adjecto [contradiction in terms]**.

(Beyond Good and Evil, §16)

* Without the two principles, Nietzsche is happy to accept that truth is possible. A true claim does not refer to mind-independent reality, but is an accurate description of empirical reality

1. **And what magnificent instruments of observation we possess in our senses!** . . . Today we possess science precisely to the extentthat we have decided to accept the testimony of the senses - to theextent to which we sharpen them further, arm them, and havelearned to think them through. The rest is miscarriage and not yet-science - in other words, metaphysics, theology, psychology,epistemology - or formal science, a doctrine of signs, such as logicand that applied logic which is called mathematics. In them realityis not encountered at all, not even as a problem — no more thanthe value of such a sign-convention as logic

(Twilight of the Idols, III, §3).

*Problem One*: this renders a lot of Nietzsche’s work redundant, at least regarding his epistemology and metaphysics

*Problem Two*: this fails to address Nietzsche’s worries about the bias of perspective. For even if true means empirically and not metaphysically true, our perspectives may still distort the truth

**Solution three: biting the bullet (the postmodern solution)**

Nietzsche’s perspectivism and scepticism applies in all of his works, and applies universally. And he accepts that it even applies to his own truth claims and beliefs. His truth claims are only intended to be statements of “his truths”:

1. Are they new friends of "truth," these upcoming philosophers? Probably, since all philosophers so far have loved their truths. But they certainly will not be dogmatists. It would offend their pride, as well as their taste, if their truth were a truth for everyone (which has been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations so far). "My judgment is my judgment: other people don't have an obvious right to it too" - perhaps this is what such a philosopher of the future will say. We must do away with the bad taste of wanting to be in agreement with the majority.

(Beyond Good and Evil, §43)

1. On account of the abundant civility that I have just extended to myself, I will perhaps be more readily allowed to pronounce a few truths about the "woman an sich": assuming that people now know from the outset the extent to which these are only - my truths. –

(Beyond Good and Evil, §231)

So why does Nietzsche write at all? His intended readership are those who are already sufficiently close to his “perspective” to join him in accepting “his truths”.

*Problem One*: it is hard to make sense of Nietzsche’s critique of morality like this. Say he is trying persuade those sufficiently like him of the dangers of slave morality. But doesn’t that mean that he thinks he has identified something dangerous about morality? And if this danger is just a projection of Nietzsche’s own mind, and he knows it, then why would he worry?

*Problem Two*: if Nietzsche simply reduced truth to projection and perspectival interpretation , then how do we make sense of the many complicated things he has to say about the “will to truth”?

**The Will to Truth and Morality**

Nietzsche’s epistemology is not just about skepticism. He also treats “truth” as a sociological practice, just as he does “morality”. Truth is a system of cultural norms, that includes expectations that we will search for truth and tell the truth.

Truth is also just one cultural practice among others. And truth standards are just one standard by which we can judge a belief or claim. Beliefs and claims can also be judged by standards of pragmatism, or health, or utility, or aesthetics, or even morality.

1. **We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates, the type.** And we are fundamentally inclined to claim that the falsest judgments (which include synthetic judgments a priori) are the most indispensable to us, and that without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the wholly invented world of the unconditioned and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world through numbers, people could not live - that a renunciation of false judgments would be a renunciation of life, a negation of life. **To acknowledge untruth as a condition of life: this clearly means resisting the usual value feelings in a dangerous manner; and a philosophy that risks such a thing would by that gesture alone place itself beyond good and evil.**

(Beyond Good and Evil §4)

The most radical Nietzsche suggestion: previous epistemologies have failed to ask the question: why is truth is better than falsity?

Nietzsche’s novelty in this area lies in both asking this question, and in his answer. For Nietzsche, we assume truth is better than falsity because this is another example of deeply ingrained moral prejudice. In short, Nietzsche thinks the will to truth is moral.

1. However, the compulsion towards it, that unconditional will to truth, is faith in the ascetic ideal itself even is as an unconscious imperative, make no mistake about it, - it is the faith in a metaphysical value, a value as such of truth as vouched for and confirmed by that ideal alone (it stands and falls by that ideal).

(On the Genealogy of Morality, Essay 3, §24)

But why does Nietzsche think the will to truth is moral? Here are two different accounts he gives one from 1873, one from 1887:

**A:** The will to truth develops form the desire to condemn deceivers (from ‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense’)

* The desire for truth originates in the formation of human communities
* Community safety requires we are able to identify those within the community who misrepresent reality for their own selfish gain
* Thus truth and falsehood are in the first instance specifically honesty and deception or trickery
* More broadly, truth and falsehood are thought of in terms of usefulness. Truths that are useful are good, deception that is harmful for the community is bad.

1. Human beings do not so much flee from being tricked as from being harmed by being tricked. Even on this level they do not hate deception but rather the damaging, inimical consequences of certain species of deception. Truth, too, is only desired by human beings in a similarly limited sense. They desire the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; they are indifferent to pure knowledge if it has no consequences, but they are actually hostile towards truths which may be harmful and destructive.

(‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-moral Sense, p.143 of the Cambridge Press edition of *the birth of tragedy*)

* Even in this early text, Nietzsche claims there is moral weight to the way that we treat truths and falsehoods.

**B:** the will to truth is driven by the ascetic ideal (found in Essay 3 of *On the Genealogy of Morality*)

* Morality introduces asceticism to reinterpret failure to satisfy desire as a hard-won accomplishment, and thereby a virtue. This is particularly attractive to those with no means to satisfy their interests or who suffer from frustrated desire
* This morphs into an “ascetic ideal”: it is best to be without desire, interest, or appetite, and to be cold and indifferent (or “stoical”)
* That ascetic ideal is adopted by philosophers and scientists, who reinterpret the stoical perspective of the ascetic ideal as an ideal stance from which to know the truth about reality
* The will to truth in philosophy and science is thus a will to know reality without subjective interest, desire, or appetite
* But that will to truth is motivated not by the value of truth itself but rather by the desire of philosophers and scientists to escape from the suffering of their frustrated appetites. In short, the will to truth is a form of life-denial.

*Matt Bennett*

*Email* [*mpb74@cam.ac.uk*](mailto:mpb74@cam.ac.uk)

*Website (including teaching materials): drmattbennett.weebly.com*