

**Nietzsche on Truth and Perspective:
Between Positivism and Post-Modernism**

I

“It is not the victory of science that distinguishes our nineteenth century, but the victory of scientific method over science.”¹

In the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche makes an observation about Plato: “... to speak of spirit and the good as Plato did meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective* itself, the basic condition of all life”.² What is notable in this remark is not Nietzsche’s (rather predictable) disparagement of the Platonic philosophy but the fact that he does so in terms of the concept of truth. To deny perspective is, he says, “to stand truth on her head”. It has seemed to many of Nietzsche’s readers that there is an inconsistency here: that the idea of perspective runs contrary to the claim that we are able to know the truth. If each of us only has access to reality from his or her own perspective, does that not preclude the objectivity that truth requires?³ If Nietzsche is consistent there are, it seems, only two possibilities. Either he does not really believe that perspectivism is true, or perspectivism does not imply that we are incapable of attaining knowledge of the truth.

¹ *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli and M. Molinari (Munich: DTV, 1988), volume XIII (*Nachlass* 1887-89), 15 [51]

² *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), Preface, p. 14

As it happens, these two possibilities correspond to the two main currents of contemporary Nietzsche interpretation. For one, largely inspired by post-structuralist readers such as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and de Man⁴, Nietzsche's revolutionary contribution to philosophy is to have overthrown the traditional concept of truth: the idea that truth is a unique, determinate and rationally mandatory ideal towards which to aspire, and to have located his philosophy within a realm in which there are (as Foucault says) only "regimes of truth"⁵. On this view, when Nietzsche invokes the term "truth" in favour of his own views, as he does in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, he is doing so rhetorically: seeking to exploit its inherited force in the service of the values that he espouses without accepting the traditional claims made on truth's behalf.⁶ For the second stream, however, Nietzsche⁷ intends to claim his position as true in very much the traditional fashion. As such interpreters point out, Nietzsche very frequently makes factual claims (often based upon the findings of the natural sciences) in support of his own views. Yet he could not do this consistently, they argue, unless he accepted that scientifically established empirical beliefs have a special kind of authority, the authority that comes from truth. Thus Nietzsche's apparent rejection of the notion of truth is

³ [[Williams x 2]]

⁴ [[add references]]

⁵ See M. Foucault, "Two Lectures", in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 78-108, esp. pp. 93-94.

⁶ The self-referential paradox – or its converse: Jewish poker.

⁷ Ref Leiter, Clark (metaphysical naturalism, methodological naturalism, empiricism, positivism).

best read as no more than a rejection of certain philosophical accounts of truth's nature, scope or value⁸⁹

The account of Nietzsche's understanding of truth to be presented in this paper steers a course between¹⁰ these contending schools of interpretation. On the one hand, the account given here agrees with the post-modernists that the doctrine of perspectivism has radical implications regarding our ability to have access to truth; on the other, it agrees with the naturalists that science has objective authority for Nietzsche. The essence of my interpretation is encapsulated in the quotation that serves as the paper's epigraph. The authority of the scientific *method*, as I read Nietzsche, comes from the fact that it is part of the pursuit of truth. But one result of this pursuit of truth is the conclusion that knowledge of what is finally true is unattainable by us. Yet this does not prevent Nietzsche from claiming that certain views have the authority that comes from the pursuit of truth. Moreover, the radical implications of the

⁸ e.g. his account of truth is pragmatist, e.g. he believes that metaphysical claims cannot be true, e.g. he believes that religious or crypto-religious motivation leads one to over-value truth

⁹ [[move this footnote and add references to Clark, Poellner, Leiter, Gemes, Geuss]] Maudemarie Clark, who has given the most extensive and thoughtful account of Nietzsche along these lines defends her interpretation by claiming that Nietzsche's views undergo a radical development. From 1872-1888, Nietzsche believed in the "falsification thesis" – the idea that our access to reality, being only mediate, perspectival access, produces a necessarily distorted image. It is only in the last year of his sane life, in 1888 – in fact, in the opening pages of *Twilight of the Idols* – that Nietzsche finally renounces this thesis, Clark claims. This is, of course, to put a great weight of interpretation on a very small proportion of text. Moreover, it seems to me that, however regrettably from Clark's point of view, the evidence for such a great reversal in *Twilight of the Idols* is by no means compelling.

perspectivist doctrine do not rest upon the rejection of the process of rational belief-formation that we associate with the scientific enterprise, but follow, in Nietzsche's view, from pursuing that process to its final point.¹¹ It has seemed to many interpreters that a position such as this falls prey to some form of self-referential paradox.¹² But the account to be given here will argue that Nietzsche's position (although certainly not unobjectionable) is not viciously self-undermining.

Before developing my interpretation, it is important to make clear my position regarding certain central methodological issues. As the existence of two such strikingly different schools of interpretation suggests, the textual evidence regarding Nietzsche's views often seems to point in more than one direction.¹³ How should such apparent conflicts be approached? There are four basic possibilities.

¹⁰ I should like to say "reconciles", though, given the vehemence with which Nietzsche's interpreters advance their readings, that may seem unlikely.

¹¹ Leiter takes this quotation to signify Nietzsche's adherence to science. (*Nietzsche on Morality*, p.7). He pays no attention to Nietzsche's that the scientific method itself leads to a "victory ... over science".

¹² The issue is expressed with exemplary clarity and honesty by Danto:
To put it sophomorically but no less vexingly, was it [Nietzsche's] intention, in saying that nothing is true, to say something true? If he succeeded, then of course he failed, for if it is true that nothing is true, something is true after all. If it is false, then something again is true. If, again, what he says is as arbitrary as he has said, critically, that all of philosophy is, why should we accept him if we are to reject all the others? And if not arbitrary, how can it be right?

(*Nietzsche as Philosopher*, p. 230)

¹³ Consider, for example, Nietzsche's views on science. While Leiter presents an account of Nietzsche's favourable judgements regarding science (see *Nietzsche on Morality*, Ch. 1) and Clark asserts that Nietzsche's mature writings "exhibit a uniform and unambiguous respect for facts, the senses and

(1) Nietzsche is consistent and any apparent inconsistencies can be removed by a sufficiently ingenious and historically sensitive interpretation.¹⁴

(2) Although the full corpus of Nietzsche's texts *does* show inconsistencies, this is because the inconsistent texts are not all of equal canonical value. This may be because Nietzsche's views have changed (hence earlier published texts should be discounted) or because texts are being adduced in evidence that have a lesser status (thus Nietzsche scholars divide sharply regarding the weight to be given to texts from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*).¹⁵

(3) Although Nietzsche is inconsistent, he is, if you will, consistently inconsistent: that is, he does not aim at consistency but is a kind of gadfly who, although he uses the language of philosophy, is not constrained by the limitations of philosophical argument and so feels free to take up any position that serves his rhetorical purposes.¹⁶

science" (*Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, p.105), Alexander Nehamas cites passages to support his claim of "Nietzsche's fundamental suspiciousness of science" ("The Eternal Recurrence", p. 121).

¹⁴ This is the approach taken by Leiter – perspectivism doesn't imply falsity, interpretation doesn't mean mutually incompatible interpretation, fiction doesn't imply falsity, etc. Bad faith of the post-modernists

¹⁵ This is the position defended by Clark in *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Clark believes both that there is a quite radical change of position signalled by *Twilight of the Idols* and that evidence from the *Nachlass* should be, so far as possible, discounted. Clark's interpretation will be addressed in section [[??]] below.

¹⁶ As indicated above, this is the position of the post-modern interpreters – nor is it without some textual support. See below

(4) Although Nietzsche aims to advance a consistent position, he simply does not succeed in doing so.

The first three approaches at least are all adopted by serious interpreters of Nietzsche, while it seems that the fourth possibility cannot be excluded in any merely mortal author.¹⁷ The approach that I shall take is a combination of (1) and (4). I shall advance an interpretation that claims that Nietzsche's utterances throughout his career, both published and unpublished, have a basic underlying consistency while arguing that in certain areas Nietzsche expresses himself in ways that are sometimes confused, self-contradictory or, at least, regrettably unclear. Such inconsistencies may, however, be to some extent reconstructed in a way that is consonant with what one takes to be his fundamental position and this seems to be an appropriate part of philosophical interpretation.¹⁸

Maudemarie Clark, whose interpretation of Nietzsche's views on truth is by far the most substantial and sophisticated in the existing literature, takes a different approach, however. It is only at the end of his writing life, Clark

¹⁷ For fairly obvious sociological reasons, few interpreters believe that Nietzsche's work is fundamentally flawed: after all, it then hardly seems worth while to devote the considerable effort necessary to interpret him. In fact, of course, at some level, inconsistency is probably the fate of all philosophers: certain of our claims when fully analysed will entail unforeseen consequences that turn out to be incompatible with other beliefs to which we had committed ourselves. The difference between good and bad philosophy is presumably how glaring and palpable such contradictions are.

¹⁸ But Nietzsche was not, of course, a professional philosopher and he had considerable contempt for academic philosophy. Thus he was hardly prepared, by training or temperament, to conform to the regimentation of vocabulary

believes, that Nietzsche achieves his final and best position regarding knowledge and truth.¹⁹ It would be beside the point, then, if my own contrary interpretation were to be wholly dependent on texts that Clark excludes because she considers them to embody superseded positions. To meet that difficulty I shall proceed as follows. I shall start by developing the outlines of the account I wish to defend using principally texts that Nietzsche himself published before what Clark takes to be Nietzsche's adoption of his final position. I shall then take issue with Clark's alternative account. It is significant (or so I shall argue) that the evidence Clark adduces for a radical change of position on Nietzsche's part is dependent on her own interpretation of the changed position that she claims to detect in the texts. She does not, that is to say, demonstrate that Nietzsche himself took his own later work to be as radically inconsistent with his earlier views on the nature of truth and knowledge. I shall argue, however, that the texts on which Clark's claim that Nietzsche's position has changed radically depend do not, in fact, mandate the account that she gives of them. Hence the fact that Nietzsche himself does not indicate that he is aware that his views have changed drastically should, in my view, be given considerable weight. I shall then go on to give further supporting argument for my own interpretation on the basis of evidence from the *Nachlass*. My account is, I believe, powerfully supported by but not

that most philosophers regard as the pre-condition for productive philosophical debate.

¹⁹ But she seems to have changed her mind (see essay in Janaway (ed.))

dependent for its force upon this wider evidence.²⁰ I shall conclude by asking what consequences follow from my interpretation for our wider understanding of Nietzsche's enterprise and of what remains of interest and value in his project.

II

Does perspectivism mean that we are not capable of attaining knowledge of the truth?²¹ The following passage from Book 5 of *The Gay Science* (1882, revised 1887) establishes a *prima facie* case.

This is the essence of phenomenalism and perspectivism as I understand them: Owing to the nature of *animal consciousness*, the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface and sign-world, a world that is made commoner and meaner; whatever becomes conscious *becomes* by that same token shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd signal; all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization. ... You will guess that it is not the opposition of subject and object that concerns me here: This distinction I leave to the epistemologists who have become entangled in the snares of grammar

²⁰ I should make clear that the reason for focusing to a large extent on Clark's work is that its clarity, consistency and originality represents the outstanding contribution to Nietzsche interpretation in recent years.

²¹ Clark sometimes refers to Nietzsche's denial of truth as "the falsification thesis" (e.g. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, p. 117) which is potentially misleading.

(the metaphysics of the people). It is even less the opposition of “thing in itself” and appearance; for we do not “know” nearly enough to be entitled to any such distinction. We simply lack any organ for knowledge, for ‘truth’: we ‘know’ (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be *useful* in the interests of the human herd, the species²².

That this passage establishes that, in Nietzsche’s view, perspectivism leads to the denial of our ability to know the truth is accepted by Maudemarie Clark, although she argues that Nietzsche’s views undergo a radical change at the end of his writing life.²³ Brian Leiter, however, disputes this reading of GS 354. He makes three claims:

- (1) The passage presupposes the truth of certain empirical beliefs, so cannot (or, at least, cannot on Leiter’s charitable assumption that Nietzsche is consistent) be asserting that such beliefs are false²⁴
- (2) What are false, if anything, are the immediate data of the senses, not judgements based on reflection of the kind that we rely on in science.

²² *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), Sect 354, pp. 299-300

²³ see *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* ch 4 section 4 p. 120-123 for Clark’s claim that at this stage of his career Nietzsche is in thrall to a “representationalism” that he would later reject.

²⁴ “It would be surprising if even this passage reflected Nietzsche’s belief in the falsification thesis ... since, on its face, it also presupposes the truth of ‘physiology and the history of animals,’ the sciences which ground the passage’s (purportedly true) claims about the origin of consciousness and language.” *Nietzsche on Morality* p. 18

(3) That Nietzsche is only denying that we have knowledge of the distinction between “thing in itself” and “appearance”.

I consider Leiter’s interpretation to be unpersuasive on all three points, however. His first point begs the question. It is the argument of this paper that Nietzsche holds that beliefs derived from the scientific investigation of the world do indeed have a special authority despite his belief that the perspectival character of our engagement with reality makes access to the world as it is impossible.²⁵ Thus Leiter is not entitled to infer from the mere fact that Nietzsche gives scientific beliefs a special authority that he does not believe that perspectivism cuts us off from the ultimate nature of things.

Leiter’s second point ascribes a view to Nietzsche – that the senses falsify but that judgements do not – that is, in fact, just the opposite of the one that Nietzsche actually holds.²⁶ Consider the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

... it is high time to replace the Kantian question “how are synthetic judgements *a priori* possible?” with another question “why is belief in such judgements *necessary*?” – that is to say, it is time to grasp that, for the purpose of preserving beings such as ourselves, such

²⁵ Nietzsche is, he continues, “presumably talking about ‘consciousness’ in the sense of immediate sensory (phenomenal) experience, as distinct from the *theoretical* understanding of the world (for example, via sciences like physiology) we might arrive at through experiment and systematic enquiry.” *Nietzsche on Morality* p. 18 In other words, to the extent that this passage *does* imply the falsification thesis, it is the claim that the senses falsify, not the sciences.

²⁶

judgements must be *believed* to be true; although they might of course still be *false* judgements! Or, more clearly, crudely and basically: synthetic judgements *a priori* should not “be possible” at all: we have no right to them, in our mouths they are nothing but false judgements. But belief in their truth is, of course, necessary as foreground belief and ocular evidence belonging to the perspective optics of life.²⁷

The judgements that Nietzsche is here characterising as species-preserving but false are not matters of immediate sensory experience; nor are they derived from such experience. Like Kant, Nietzsche believes that synthetic *a priori* judgements (the most celebrated being “every event has a cause”) are foundational for the particular propositions to be found in the empirical sciences; yet they are, he says, both *necessary* and *false*. The fact that Nietzsche thinks this indicates that it is not the mere fact of being derived from the senses that makes judgements false: apparently the “perspective optics of life” makes judgements that are underived from the senses (but are supposed to apply to what is derived from the senses) equally false.²⁸

Finally, Leiter asserts that it is *only* the distinction between the thing-in-itself and appearance that Nietzsche believes to fall beyond our knowledge. But this is a plain *non sequitur*. From Nietzsche’s statement that we do not know enough to be entitled to the distinction between thing-in-itself and appearance, it does not follow that it is only the distinction between thing-in-

²⁷ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9

²⁸ return to this below. the “snares of grammar”

itself and appearance that we lack knowledge of. A more plausible reading, surely, says that it is *because* we lack knowledge of the way that things really are except through the perspective character of our knowing that – among other things – we lack knowledge sufficient for the distinction between appearance and thing in itself. I see no reason therefore to accept Leiter’s reading.

An apparently more promising approach to this passage for those who do not want to accept that it shows that Nietzsche believes that we cannot gain knowledge of truth would be to read it simply as a challenge to a certain conception of what truth is. Someone who advocated such a reading might point out that Nietzsche writes in the final sentence above that we lack any organ for knowledge or for “truth” (not truth) and that we “know” (rather than know) as much as may be useful in the interests of the species. Focusing on those aspects of the quotation, one might want to read Nietzsche in the following way. The organ that we lack, we might take Nietzsche to be saying on this interpretation, is an organ that would give us truth in the traditional sense – beliefs that correspond to a realm of determinate, mind-independent facts, say. But what we really believe or imagine – indeed, what we *know* – is what is useful to us as members of our species. On this reading, Nietzsche is re-defining the notion of truth; instead of a traditional idea of truth as correspondence, he is advancing a pragmatic conception of truth as utility. And, in that case, of course, so far from denying that we are capable of attaining the truth, Nietzsche is claiming just the opposite: in believing or

imagining what is useful, we are gaining knowledge of what is true because that is just what truth properly means. There is no wedge to be driven between what is true and what is useful because truth now just *means* “useful”, so, provided that perspectivism can be argued to be useful, the tension between perspectivism and truth disappears.

Another passage of Nietzsche’s might be thought to offer itself to a similar interpretation. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, 4, (1886) Nietzsche writes:

The falseness of a judgement is to us not necessarily an objection to it: it is here that our new language perhaps sounds strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-enhancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding; and our fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest judgements (to which synthetic judgements *a priori* belong) are the most indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not live ...²⁹

In the spirit of the interpretation given above, this passage could be read as offering us an account of truth as meaning whatever is “life-enhancing, life-preserving, species-preserving or species-breeding”.³⁰ If that is so, then when Nietzsche talks about such things as logic, identity or numbers as

²⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 4.

³⁰ See Mueller-Lauter

“false”, “invented” or “fictitious” he intends to suggest that they are spurious only when measured against a traditional standard of truth, a standard which must be rejected. Take this line of interpretation and the problem from which this paper started can be resolved. To deny perspective stands truth on its head because it denies a doctrine that is life-enhancing, life-preserving, species-preserving or species-breeding.

Yet it is as clear as anything can be in the interpretation of Nietzsche, that he does, indeed, believe what the interpretation discussed above denies: namely, that there is a contrast between the notion of truth and subjective notions such as usefulness or life-enhancingness. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

No one is likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes happy or makes virtuous: excepting perhaps the dear ‘idealists’, who rapturize over the good, the true and the beautiful and let all kinds of colourful and good-natured desiderata swim about together in their pond. Happiness and virtue are no arguments. But even thoughtful spirits like to forget that making unhappy and making evil are just as little counter-arguments.³¹

So it follows that when, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche characterizes our indispensably useful beliefs as *false*, he does not mean just

³¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 39.

“failing to meet an inherited standard that we are entitled to reject” but something stronger.³²

Nietzsche does not confine himself, as he does in GS 354, to the claim that perspectivism leads us to make false judgements about the world. Perspectivism, he says at different times, gives the world itself a character that is interpretive, infinite or *false*. Thus he writes later in *The Gay Science* in a passage to which he gives the title *Our new “infinite”*:

How far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without “sense”, does not become “nonsense”; whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in *interpretation* – that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect; for in the course of this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and *only* in these. We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be; for example, whether some beings might be able to experience time backward, or alternately forward and backward (which would involve another direction of life and another concept of cause and effect). But I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in

32

decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world become “infinite” for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations.³³

To make this passage and those similar to it consistent with GS 354 requires us to attribute to Nietzsche the belief that it makes no sense to separate the world from our interpretations of the world: the world just *is* an interpreted world.³⁴ Hence if perspectivism – a thesis about human beings access to the world – entails that an infinite number of interpretations are possible then there is also a clear sense in which the world itself has become infinite.³⁵

I conclude then that *The Gay Science* 374 does indeed deny that we can have knowledge of truth. Nor is this passage an isolated one. Leaving aside for the moment Nietzsche’s early works and his unpublished writings,

³³ *The Gay Science*, 374

³⁴ While interpreters such as Clark, Leiter and Poellner endorse Nietzsche’s second claim, they point out that the interpretations which this gives rise to are not necessarily mutually incompatible.

³⁵ Note, however, that the fact that the world should contain the possibility of an infinite number of interpretations does not exclude mean that these interpretations are false. If such interpretations are not in conflict with one another then there might be a plurality – perhaps even an infinite number – of perspective-governed but mutually compatible “takes” on the reality, each of which is objectively valid but no one of which expresses a privileged, absolute conception of reality. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, however, Nietzsche asserts that the world itself is “erroneous” (34).

further statements apparently to this effect can be found in *Beyond Good and Evil*³⁶ *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and elsewhere in *The Gay Science*.

On the face of it, then, Nietzsche holds four views:

(1) perspectivism means that we cannot gain knowledge of the world as it is

(2) many fundamental beliefs that we necessarily take to be true are, in fact, false

(3) truth means something other than usefulness or the capacity to enhance life

(4) perspectivism has truth on its side

It is generally believed by Nietzsche commentators that these four views are inconsistent.³⁷ I shall argue that this is not so and that if there are fundamental objections to Nietzsche's position it is not here that they lie.³⁸

³⁶ "... it is high time to replace the Kantian question 'how are synthetic judgements *a priori* possible?' with another question: 'why is belief in such judgements *necessary*?' – that is to say, it is time to grasp that, for the purpose of preserving beings such as ourselves, such judgements must be *believed* to be true; although they might of course still be *false* judgements! Or, more clearly, crudely and basically: synthetic judgements *a priori* should not 'be possible' at all: we have no right to them, in our mouths they are nothing but false judgements. But belief in their truth is, of course, necessary as

³⁷ Actually, it is (1), (3) and (4) that are inconsistent ((2) is a consequence of (1)). (1) and (4) seem to be grossly inconsistent (perspectivism denies that there is truth; thus perspectivism, if true, implies its own falsehood – hence it is refuted by *reductio ad absurdum*) and so a position such as (3) is adopted in order to overcome the inconsistency.

³⁸ A note about method. It is not, of course, necessarily true that the best interpretation of a historical author is the one that makes his (or her) views most consistent. Nevertheless there is a presumption that someone who cared so intensely about the issues that he addresses did indeed hold a position with

III

The solution must lie, of course, in attributing a particular conception of truth to Nietzsche, one that will allow him to claim both that perspectivism is true and that it implies that we cannot have access to the truth. To explain what I take that understanding of truth to be is the next part of my task.

I shall start by quickly introducing some standard distinctions between various aspects of the meaning of a concept before using those distinctions to explain the particular features of Nietzsche's understanding of the concept of truth. Three of these distinctions go back to Frege, and, although the details of them are very controversial, the outlines are not. The first relevant aspect of meaning is the reference or extension of a term. This is simply the thing or things in the world that the term picks out. So "red" picks out the property that the class of red objects has, "Tony Blair" the man who is at the time of writing the Prime Minister of Great Britain, and so on. The second aspect, sense, is that aspect of our knowledge of language that characterizes the thing referred to in a way that enables us to individuate it. Frege's own example is the twin terms "morning star" and "evening star" which pick out the same object but do so, evidently, via different routes. Thus, although they have the same reference, they have different senses. Thirdly, there is the force of a term: whatever it is that is conveyed to the auditor when a term is used. Many nouns

some underlying consistency, even if the language within which it is expressed appears to be inconsistent at times.

and noun phrases have a standard force – to draw attention to the reference. But consider a term like “delicious”. When I say that “the food at Balliol is delicious”, I am not simply ascribing a property to that food (or, more likely, ascribing a quality to my reaction to it); I am also *commending* it as good to eat. For our purposes here, however, we require a fourth element to supplement those of *reference*, *sense* and *force*: the *motive* of a concept – what it is that makes us frame the concept in question and what it is that leads us to value and pursue the idea it embodies?

With this apparatus in mind, let us turn to the concept of truth. Here too it is possible to distinguish between *extension* – those things that are true – *sense* – what it is that enables us to determine that they are true – *force* – what it is that we convey when we say of something that it is true – and *motive* – why we form the concept of truth and pursue it as an ideal. Nietzsche’s view is best presented in contrast with what we might think of as the received view of the nature of truth. On the received view what are true – the extension of the concept of truth – are, paradigmatically, empirical truths about the world, the truths of science and mathematics. What makes those truths true – the sense of the concept – is that those propositions match up to the unique way that the world is. When we say of a proposition that it is true we do various things. First, we – standardly, at least – commend it as good and useful to believe. What is more, we convey that it is good and useful to believe *just because* it matches the way that the world is. Moreover, in describing a proposition as true we also give it an important logical property: that of excluding its

negation. If A is true, then not-A is false. These are all parts of the force of the concept of truth, as commonly understood. Finally, there is the motive for the concept of truth: the received idea that it is both practically useful and morally edifying to come to know the world as it is, impersonally and objectively.

Now what aspect of the received notion of truth does Nietzsche wish to challenge? Is he saying, for instance, that those things that we take to be true (the propositions of the natural sciences) are indeed true, but that what makes them true is not what we think (for instance, they are true because they are useful, not because they match the world). In that case, we might say, Nietzsche is retaining the extension of the concept of truth but challenging the sense. Or is it that he is denying that those things that we think are true do, in fact, match the world? Is he retaining the sense, but disputing the extension? Perhaps, rather, he is disputing the force of the concept – maintaining that truths are not, necessarily, things that we ought to believe and error things to reject? Or perhaps, finally, he is contesting the idea that the pursuit of truth stems from a laudable desire for self-elevation above the base contingency of existence?

Initially, it seems that the best reading of Nietzsche's texts sees him as challenging the received concept of truth in all four areas. As far as the extension is concerned, insofar as science presupposes such basic concepts as number, identity and causation, scientific propositions, however useful, rest on

fictions and are therefore false.³⁹ As to sense, since the content of the doctrine of perspectivism is that it is not possible for us to vindicate our beliefs by direct perceptual access to reality, it appears to follow that, if the sense of the concept of truth is that those propositions are true which match the unique way the world is, then perspectivism will commit Nietzsche to a radical epistemic scepticism; we will have no way of telling whether any of our beliefs are in fact true. And in that case, what becomes of the claim made on behalf of perspectivism itself? What could justify Nietzsche's assertion that it has truth on its side? As regards force, Nietzsche, as we have seen, explicitly claims that truth may be harmful and error good to believe. Finally, in some celebrated passages, Nietzsche denies the claims conventionally made regarding the motives behind the search for truth and claims instead that it is a product of a drive for security and a desire to "stand on firm ground" that is both weak and, ultimately, futile.⁴⁰

Yet the very radicalism of Nietzsche's attack on the received notion of truth threatens to undermine it, for surely there must be at least some commonality of meaning between Nietzsche and the received view of truth for

³⁹ See the quotation from *Human, All Too Human*, I,19 discussed below.

⁴⁰ "Metaphysics is still needed by some; but so is that imperious *demand for certainty* that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form. The demand that one *wants* by all means that something should be firm (while on account of the ardour of this demand one is easier and more negligent about the demonstration of this certainty) – this, too, is still the demand for a support, a prop, in short, that *instinct of weakness* which, to be sure, does not create religious, metaphysical systems, and convictions of all kinds but – conserves them." *The Gay Science* translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), Sect 347

Nietzsche's view to be a challenge to the received view at all. (It is one thing to deny that tigers are fierce, but what remains of that denial if I then go on to deny that tigers are large cats with black and yellow stripes that live in the jungle?)

IV

Having established the nature of the problem and rejected the most common ways of trying to defuse it, it is now time for me to resolve it. To do so, however, I must introduce yet another distinction in relation to the notion of truth. This is the distinction between the *sense* of the concept of truth and what I shall call its *criterion*. The distinction is not hard to grasp: it is a distinction between what it would be for something to be true and how we might tell that it was so. The former is strictly semantic (a matter of pure meaning) while the latter is clearly epistemic (it concerns a question of our capacity for knowledge).⁴¹ Confusingly, these two aspects are often run together in discussions of truth, not least by Nietzsche himself (thus, as we have seen, he

⁴¹ Some might dispute that it is possible to draw a distinction between the sense of a concept and its criterion. If we follow Dummett, sense is a cognitive notion inasmuch as to grasp a sense is to grasp the contribution that a term makes to determining the reference of the complex of which it forms a part. This suggests (I am sure deliberately on Dummett's part) that it is not possible to possess the sense of a term without also possessing the criterion by which to apply it. But is that always so? A blind person may grasp the sense of the term "sparkling" without being able to identify a sparkling object. Likewise, a person ignorant of physics may know that quarks are the building blocks of matter, that they come in different flavours, and so on, without being remotely able to pick one out. This is not to say that under normal circumstances there

writes that we lack an organ for knowledge or for truth as if the latter were simply equivalent to the former). Separating them, however, enables me to explain the way in which perspectivism threatens to lead to radical scepticism more clearly. Let us take a received, realist interpretation of the sense of the notion of truth – for example, the idea that true beliefs are expressive of the ultimate nature of reality. Now perspectivism is an epistemological doctrine, not a semantic one, so it cannot, as it stands, conflict with that view of truth. What it does do, however, is to conflict with a received view about the criterion for truth: namely, that we must establish our beliefs as true in that realist sense by perceptual comparison of them with the world as it exists outside our minds. If Nietzsche is committed to a realist truth-criterion of that form then there is a serious problem in accepting the truth of perspectivism. For if perspectivism is true (and if it is to be understood as I have argued that it should be) then the realist truth-criterion of perceptual comparison is impossible. So it follows that we would have no way of establishing any truths – the truth of perspectivism itself very much included.

It is my claim that the best way to read Nietzsche is as combining a realist account of the sense of truth with an anti-realist or internalist truth-criterion, a criterion that is compatible with perspectivism, and it is to the explanation of this that the final part of my paper will be devoted. To do so, I wish to return to Nietzsche's very first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

is not a very close connection between sense and criterion. Nevertheless, there is, I think, a clear distinction between the two ideas.

There (particularly in sections 12-17) we find a discussion of what Nietzsche calls “Socratic optimism”. This, in a nutshell, is the idea that one way in which human beings come to terms with the world is in seeing it as open to understanding. That conviction, according to Nietzsche, is a form of faith – faith, namely, in the principle that everything can be explained by some sufficient reason. So the Socratic quest for explanation, according to Nietzsche, involves the search for some stopping – or starting – point; some fact, principle or perception which cannot be questioned and on which other things can rest; some ground or foundation for our beliefs. The project of the quest for truth is the search for a certain kind of security: whatever may happen to us physically, it is consoling to believe that we are capable of knowing an order of things which is independent of us.

The criterion of truth, on this view, is that what is true can be justified by being given a foundation. How, then, can we establish such beliefs? For the realist tradition initiated by Socratic optimism the answer is obvious: our beliefs must be matched up against mind-independent reality. But that tradition, Nietzsche claims, has now come to an end, and what has brought it to an end has been Socratism itself. In pursuing Socratism’s project of attempting to believe only what could be justified, two heroic German philosophers, Kant and Schopenhauer, were led to cut the ground, or so Nietzsche claims, from under realism itself. It was, Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, their great achievement to have broken the hold of our most reassuring prejudice: the idea of realism:

... great men, universally gifted, have contrived, with an incredible amount of thought, to make use of the paraphernalia of science itself, to point out the limits and the relativity of knowledge generally, and thus to deny decisively the claim of science to universal validity and universal aims. And their demonstration diagnosed for the first time the illusory notion which pretends to be able to fathom the innermost essence of things with the aid of causality. The extraordinary courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer have succeeded in gaining the most difficult victory, the victory over the optimism concealed in our culture. While this optimism, resting on apparently unobjectionable *aeternae veritates*, had believed that all the riddles of the universe could be known and fathomed, and had treated space, time, and causality as entirely unconditional laws of the most universal validity, Kant showed that these really served only to elevate the mere phenomenon, the work of *maya*, to the position of the sole and highest reality, as if it were the innermost and true essence of things, thus making impossible any knowledge of this essence or, in Schopenhauer's words, lulling the dreamer still more soundly asleep.⁴²

At this point, what may seem to be an objection to my interpretation offers itself. It seems as though I take Nietzsche to be endorsing the search for truth, the attempt on the part of Kant and Schopenhauer to push the Socratic project to its final conclusion. But if that is so, would Nietzsche not then be

⁴² *The Birth of Tragedy*, 18.

endorsing something whose motives he himself, as we saw above, appears to hold in contempt? In fact, when we look at the text, I think that the interpretation that I am proposing here receives some of its strongest support. For Nietzsche's views regarding the motives behind the quest for truth are by no means as hostile as the selectivity shown by some commentators would suggest. It is true, for example, that the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* is an extended vituperation against the ascetic ideal which, according to Nietzsche, underlies both the Christian religion and its supposed antipode, the secular world-view of materialist science. But on close inspection we find that even here Nietzsche's condemnation of asceticism is not unmixed: "All honor to the ascetic ideal *insofar as it is honest!* so long as it believes in itself and does not play tricks on us!"⁴³, he writes. Similarly, in Book One of *The Gay Science* there is an extraordinary passage (whose title is "The Intellectual Conscience") in which Nietzsche makes it clear that he himself endorses precisely that search for certainty that he seems to condemn elsewhere as weakness.

...the great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward: the most gifted men and the noblest women still belong to this 'great majority.' But what is goodheartedness, refinement or

⁴³ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III, 26

genius to me, when the person who has these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his faith and judgements and when he does not account *the desire for certainty* as his inmost craving and deepest distress – as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower.⁴⁴

For Nietzsche, the motives behind the search for truth can take two forms: the honourable desire not to be taken in by lies and hypocrisy and the weak and cowardly desire to flee from what is changeable and potentially threatening. Nietzsche does not claim that this honesty is rationally mandatory; but he certainly identifies himself with it: “Honesty ... is our virtue, from which we cannot get free, we free spirits ... we last of the Stoics!”⁴⁵

Nietzsche’s realist view of the sense of the concept of truth provides the necessary continuity between the received view of truth and his own. Whatever may be true, on this view, is so independent of the particular subjective state of any individual. But that is not the criterion of truth. The criterion of truth, rather, is what can be justified – given a foundation. If it were possible to compare our consciousnesses – our beliefs – with reality as it

⁴⁴ *The Gay Science*, 2.

⁴⁵ The passage in full: “Honesty – granted that this is our virtue, from which we cannot get free, we free spirits – well, let us labour at it with all love and malice and not weary of ‘perfecting’ ourselves in *our* virtue, the only one we may have: may its brightness one day overspread this ageing culture and its dull, gloomy seriousness like a gilded azure mocking evening glow! And if our honesty should one day none the less grow weary, and sigh, and stretch its limbs, and find us too hard, and like to have things better, easier, gentler, like an agreeable vice: let us remain *hard*, we last of the Stoics!” *Beyond Good and Evil*, 227.

is outside of us then the sense of truth and the criterion of truth would coincide and we would be justified in claiming knowledge of reality. But, as it is, the two have come apart: the search for truth has called into question the claim that we are capable of attaining knowledge of the ultimate character of reality. As we saw in the discussion of Kant and Schopenhauer in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche does not reject the idea of the pursuit of truth as the search for rationally grounded belief – his claim, rather, is that the idea that our beliefs can be rationally justified in virtue of being shown to correspond to the nature of reality must be rejected precisely because it lacks justification. This is not a position that Nietzsche later abandoned, as he undoubtedly did some of the other well-known views of *The Birth of Tragedy*. On the contrary, a central part of the argument of the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* similarly attempts to turn the concept of truth upon itself. Thus Nietzsche writes there of the belief in truth (“the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*”): “But what if this belief is becoming more and more unbelievable, if nothing turns out to be divine any longer unless it be error, blindness, lies – if God himself turns out to be our *longest lie*?”⁴⁶ This is more, I think, than a rhetorical trope adopted to satisfy Nietzsche’s *gout de paradoxe*.⁴⁷ Nietzsche means to continue the enterprise of the pursuit of truth as the search for foundations while radicalizing it.

⁴⁶ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), Essay III, 24.

⁴⁷ Those (and there are certainly all too many of them) who cherish the idea of Nietzsche as a self-contradictory thinker may be disappointed to note that

The separation that I attribute to Nietzsche between a realist interpretation of the sense of truth and an anti-realist truth-criterion provides a plausible interpretation of the otherwise puzzling fact that Nietzsche makes a number of pronouncements – albeit, mostly of a negative character – concerning what he believes reality to be like beyond the scope of our knowing apparatus. Such claims require it to be possible that there can be truths that transcend our capacity to know them. While many of Nietzsche’s other claims connect the idea of truth to the idea of what can be known from within our human, animal natures, I suggest that such passages are best read as an account of Nietzsche’s understanding of what could count as a possible truth-criterion. Nevertheless, it is only right to recognize that there is a systematic worry about Nietzsche’s position. Can he consistently endorse the enterprise of the pursuit of truth – that is, on my reading, of testing ideas for their groundedness or well-foundedness – if he does not accept that such grounding or foundation is capable of bringing us to an awareness of the ultimate nature of reality? In other words, is it not the case that the criterion of truth must, in the last analysis, track its sense? What is the point of looking for the groundedness of ideas unless we are able, ultimately, to connect them to something that is truly foundational?

Such a secure ground is precisely what, in Nietzsche’s view, philosophers who have continued the Socratic project have continuously

there is nothing paradoxical about this idea once it is realized that the conflict is between the criterion and the sense of truth: not the criterion or the sense

sought and failed to find. If the only way to test an idea were to measure it up against another known for certain then the absence of a starting point in some foundational ground would condemn the whole enterprise. Yet Nietzsche, as I understand him, believes that there is another way of testing for truth. Even though scientific discoveries are framed in terms of concepts that do not express the ultimate nature of reality, the beliefs that they lead to fit in better with the whole pattern of rational enquiry and discovery which constitutes our scientific activity than those that they should (rationally and compellingly) displace. This does not, of course, mean that Nietzsche claims to be able to know that the views that he favours and he believes to be supported by this body of coherent evidence are true; they are, however, the most reasonable beliefs to form – our best hypotheses – in the light of the best evidence that we have.

V

I shall conclude this paper by looking at a section from *Human, All Too Human* in the light of this interpretation. I take it that *Human, All Too Human* provides a good test, for Maudemarie Clark, whose reading of Nietzsche is very different from my own, has recently argued at length that it is in that

with itself.

work that Nietzsche attains a position that she describes as “empiricist”.⁴⁸ The passage in question is Section 19:

Number. – The invention of the laws of numbers was made on the basis of the error, dominant from the earliest times, that there are identical things (but in fact nothing is identical with anything else); at least that there are things (but there is no ‘thing’). The assumption of plurality always presupposes the existence of *something* that occurs more than once: but precisely here error already holds sway, here already we are fabricating beings, unities which do not exist. – Our sensations of space and time are false, for tested consistently they lead to logical contradictions. The establishment of conclusions in science always unavoidably involves us in calculating with certain false magnitudes: but because these magnitudes are at least *constant*, as for example are our sensations of time and space, the conclusions of science acquire a complete rigorousness and certainty in their coherence with one another; one can build on them – up to that final stage at which our erroneous basic assumptions, those constant errors, come to be incompatible with our conclusions, for example in the

⁴⁸ “In thus relinquishing his earlier attempt to devalue science, Nietzsche becomes an empiricist. For his rejection of metaphysics amounts to the claim that if there is a metaphysical world, a truth that differs from empirical truth, we have no way of knowing either that it is or what it is.” M. Clark, “On Knowledge, Truth and Value: Nietzsche’s Debt to Schopenhauer and the Development of his Empiricism”, in C. Janaway (ed.), *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1998), 79-115, pp. 51-52

theory of atoms. Here we continue to feel ourselves compelled to assume the existence of a ‘thing’ or material ‘substratum’ which is moved, while the whole procedure of science has pursued the task of resolving everything thing-like (material) in motions: here too our sensations divide that which moves from that which is moved, and we cannot get out of this circle because our belief in the existence of things has been tied up with our being from time immemorial. – When Kant says ‘the understanding does not draw its laws from nature, it prescribes them to nature’, this is wholly true with regard to the *concept of nature* which we are obliged to attach to nature (nature = world as idea [*Vorstellung*], that is as error), but which is the summation of a host of errors of the understanding. – To a world which is *not* our idea the laws of numbers are wholly inapplicable: these are valid only in the human world.⁴⁹

This complex passage illustrates the way in which in a very short space Nietzsche commits himself to a number of not obviously compatible claims. For the purposes of clarification let me group them under four headings.

- (1) *The Falsehood of Scientific Judgements*. All our beliefs involving quantification, space, time and causality are false, “made on the basis of error”. They are not, be it noted, merely fictive but actually

⁴⁹ *Human, All Too Human*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1986), I, 19

contradict what Nietzsche claims to be the underlying truth about reality (“nothing is identical with anything else”, “there is no ‘thing’”).

- (2) *The Insuperability of Illusion* Our perceptions (“sensations of space and time”) and judgements embodying immediate beliefs (e.g. our “belief in the existence of things”) are not capable of revision (“we cannot get out of this circle”).
- (3) *The Certainty of Science*. Despite embodying false premises (number, causation, etc.) the conclusions of science have “a complete rigorousness and certainty in their coherence with one another”.
- (4) *The Internal Breakdown Thesis*. Our everyday beliefs and the beliefs of science show themselves to be false when the procedure of science is followed through to the end

Two points should be noted. First, the German word translated as “science” is *Wissenschaft*. This is a word used to encompass both what we in English call “science” and other disciplines that incorporate intellectually rigorous methods. These methods include but are not exhausted by observation and experiment. In particular, as we can see, *a priori* reasoning in the form of the search for logical consistency occupies a central place (“Our sensations of space and time ... tested consistently lead to logical contradictions”; at the “final stage ... our erroneous basic assumptions ... come to be incompatible with our conclusions”). Note too that Nietzsche does not say that the beliefs of science (in this case, surely, the beliefs of natural science) are false but useful. They are he says – and we may think that he is

here stretching language to its very limit – false but at the same time possessing a “complete rigorousness and certainty in their coherence with one another”.

Read in the light of the interpretation developed in this paper, this passage becomes much less puzzling, however. The will to truth embodied in *Wissenschaft* involves the application of a rational process of data acquisition and criticism – the Socratic enterprise. One of its products is a set of natural scientific beliefs which are stable and coherent and, since they allow prediction, useful. In this sense, they are rigorous and certain in their coherence with one another – we may say that they have “truth on their side”. But, once they are explored more critically, and, crucially, once the will to truth has revealed the role played by human beings in the knowing process, it becomes apparent that they do not express the ultimate nature of reality. Although we cannot have perceptual access to that reality, we are able, Nietzsche believes, to make reasonable suppositions about its nature (albeit primarily of a negative kind) on the basis of a reasoning process applied to our stock of scientific knowledge and beliefs. In all of this, the criterion of truth – the complex of procedures that go together to constitute the process of rational enquiry – is aimed at finding beliefs that are mutually consistent and well founded.⁵⁰ Nietzsche’s anti-realist understanding of the criterion of truth

⁵⁰ Maudemarie Clark does not discuss this passage in her very long article, but it would seem to contradict a great deal of what she says. She writes that Nietzsche abandons the claim that correspondence to a reality beyond the empirical is conceivable – hence, the failure of correspondence is not a sign of

commits him to a critical procedure that is asymmetric and internal, one that takes and tests views at their own face value for their coherence with our best-attested (that is, least confuted) hypotheses. It is intended to be a technique for refuting dogmas, not for establishing new ones. A very large number of Nietzsche's views are presented by him as negations of inherited doctrines. Thus in *Beyond Good and Evil* the doctrine of the will to power is presented as a bold hypothesis – an interpretation – in contrast to “materialistic atomism”, which is, he says, continuing one of the themes of *Human, All Too Human* I,19, “one of the best-refuted things there are”⁵¹. Later, the idea that “our body is only a social structure composed of many souls” is presented in contrast with the “harmless self-observers” who believe in the self as an “immediate certainty”⁵².

Indeed, the same is true of perspectivism itself. When Nietzsche claims that to deny perspective is to stand truth on her head, he is not claiming that he occupies some transcendental vantage-point from which the truth of perspectivist epistemology can be established – a perspectiveless perspective

falsehood in our empirical beliefs (p.47). But this is clearly contradicted by the passage quoted. Nietzsche does not simply deny that our empirical beliefs correspond to an underlying reality (because, Clark believes, he does not consider such a notion possible) but rejects the content of specific beliefs (beliefs involving the identification of entities) as being contrary to the ultimate nature of things. Clark's claim that Nietzsche believes that “empirical knowledge [is] the only kind of human knowledge” ignores his belief that sense-based knowledge rests on false presuppositions; presuppositions whose falsehood emerges when such knowledge is subject to a process of rational criticism.

⁵¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 22, 12.

⁵² *Beyond Good and Evil*, 19, 16.

on perspective – but that those who deny perspective are committed to an affirmative view – the realistic view that the world is given to us as it intrinsically is – that has failed to stand up to the rational criticism that constitutes the pursuit of truth. As he goes on to say later in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Whatever standpoint of philosophy we may adopt today: from every point of view the *erroneousness* of the world in which we believe we live is the surest and firmest thing we can get our eyes on – we find endless grounds for it...”⁵³ So perspectivism is not so much a positive doctrine as a negative one. It is the denial of the claim that we can have access to a unique, determinate reality. Since realism fails the test of criticism, perspectivism, its negation, has truth on its side.

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⁵³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 34.