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Nietzsche's Epistemological Exhortation

Nathan A. Peters

In this pre-millennial twilight, the search for knowledge has never yet yielded such diverse and plentiful fruits. All around stand impressive monuments to human scientific inquiry. However, underlying and opposing the optimism of this land of technological plenty is an unprecedented pessimistic view of our endeavor, a pervasive nihilism. Where does morality stand today? What is knowledge? Is there a standard by which to measure? An ideal?

A timely and thoughtful attempt at replying to such questions requires an understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche. "One of the most intrepid heroes who ever ventured into the realm of thought" (Mann), Nietzsche has enjoyed a resurgence in intellectual circles, being referred to and commented on by a broad range of "postmodern" thinkers. And for good reason: Nietzsche crafted what I believe to be a very subtle and incisive epistemic *exhortation* for our present nihilistic dilemma, drawing from the history of philosophical thought and employing a depth of creativity rarely seen coupled with a pointed awareness of greater systems. I will argue that Nietzsche's perspectivist epistemology does indeed attempt to provide a epistemic standard *from a human perspective*, thereby avoiding nihilism. In this paper I will attempt to briefly follow his epistemic exhortation and outline its consequences.

As ironic as this is, Nietzsche—the anti-metaphysician, anti-Christian, anti-philosopher—does indeed set up a value as a *human, all-too-human* ideal, the value of *creativity*. In the end, he doubts everything but the will to power as the *creator*, which he posits from his relativistic point of view as essential to human experience. Nietzsche begins by declaring all of metaphysics a "fallacy" by employing a genealogical method rooted in a psychology of health ("physiology"). Once reality has been established (that of the Dionysian, the surface), he exhorts that meaning (as opposed to truth, which is metaphysical) is located in a becoming-world of appearance; an aesthetic, which, as he proceeds to relate, is actively created and appropriated by the will to power. Thus, he postulates the creativity of the will to power as the absolutely *human* epistemic principle from a perspectival vantage-point, and in the process endears himself to a sort of Heraclitean metaphysics of *physis* itself.

The Metaphysical Fallacy: A Genealogy

Insofar as Nietzsche is an argumentative philosopher, he is a non-traditional one. He describes Socrates as decadent. He practices no dialectic.

His project is "to overthrow . . . ideals," but he does not refute them; rather, he "merely draw[s] on gloves in their presence" (*EH*, 4). Such a unique philosopher (and that he surely is; a true lover of "the Joyful Wisdom") requires a unique method. For Nietzsche, the "genealogy" was the method; the destruction of the whole of Western epistemology was the goal. He begins with broad psychological observations and attempts to trace their roots both in the specific organism and in a broader historical context, using a criterion of health gleaned from his perspective on the human creative condition.

A central concern for Nietzsche throughout his works is the "will to truth," or the will to unconditional value and objective certainty. In *The Gay Science* (*GS*), he questions this human motive, most readily embodied in such intellectualisms as mathematical science and atheism. Two possibilities of its origin are stated, the will not to allow oneself to be deceived and the will not to deceive:

This unconditional will to truth—what is it? Is it the will not to allow oneself to be deceived? Or is it the will not to deceive? For the will to truth could be interpreted in the second way too—if only the special case 'I do not want to deceive myself' is subsumed under the generalization 'I do not want to deceive' (*GS*, 281).

The first possibility, the will not to allow oneself to be deceived, cannot have arisen by itself in Nietzsche's view, since there are many instances in which it is better or more useful to be deceived than to have "truth":

What do you know in advance of the character of existence to be able to decide whether the greater advantage is on the side of the unconditionally mistrustful or of the unconditionally trusting? But if both should be required, much trust as well as much mistrust, from where would science then be permitted to take its unconditional faith or conviction on which it rests, that truth is more important than any other thing, including every other conviction? Precisely this conviction could never have come into being if both truth and untruth constantly proved to be useful, which is the case (*Ibid.*).

Throughout his works, Nietzsche provides numerous examples of the utility of untruth, citing the comforting assertions of dogmatic philosophers, the deceptiveness of coquettish women, and the myriad of disguises employed in the animal kingdom. If it is the case that truth is merely a tool to be discarded when

untruth works better, then to value truth above all else must stem from other than practical concerns. Nietzsche's most important insight lies therein, that the will to truth stands firmly on moral ground: "It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world" (Nietzsche 1990, 65).

The question now becomes, what kind of morality sanctions such a non-practical phenomenon as the unconditional will to truth? Nietzsche's answer—precisely one which ascribes to a standard not of this world, but rather of an *after-world*: "But you will have gathered what I am driving at, namely, that it is . . . a *metaphysical* faith upon which our faith in science rests" (*GS*, 283; italics mine).

It is at this point that Nietzsche's argument becomes a genealogy, mining history for the origin and development of the metaphysical basis for the will to truth. His culminating assertion, that the value of unconditional truth is self-annulling (that is, that the will to truth as it progresses and refines itself has turned upon itself and negated itself), necessarily carries with it the "*revaluation of all values*." As Nietzsche so modestly proclaims in his *Ecce Homo* (*EH*), it marks a turning point in human history: "this is my formula for an act of supreme coming-to-oneself on the part of mankind which in me has become flesh and genius" (96).

One may follow Nietzsche's story of the demise of metaphysics in a section in *The Twilight of the Idols* (*TI*) entitled, "How the 'True World' finally became a Fable: The History of an Error." The basic narrative follows thus: at its inception, the true world (the after, beyond, higher world) was attainable to the Platonic, virtuous, wise man. This was made possible by the *decadence* of Socrates, which is suggested

not only by the admitted wantonness and anarchy of his instincts, but also by the hypertrophy of the logical faculty and that *sarcasm of the rachitic* which distinguishes him. . . . Socrates was a misunderstanding. . . . Rationality at any price . . . was a mere disease. . . . To *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness equals instinct (*TI*, 475, 478-9).

This Platonic "ideal world" was then grafted onto Christianity and thereby placed beyond the realm of life—it became a promise and an instrument of guilt. This paradigm held sway over men until philosophy in general and Kant in particular relegated the ideal world (*noumena*) to the unknowable, and yet still postulated it through the synthetic *a priori* statement. But "how could something unknown obligate us?" Nietzsche asks. Positivism arises therewith, and the

"true" world becomes a "refuted idea," "an idea which has become useless and superfluous" (*Ibid.*, 485).

This final death-stroke of the unconditional value of truth takes Positivism with it, for "With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one" (*Ibid.*, 486). That is, since the will to truth must be conditional, even surface appearances (phenomena) must be conditioned:

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—"There are only facts"—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself': perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing (*WP*, 267).

Nietzsche goes on to refute the radical subjectivism suggested above:

'Everything is subjective,' you say; but even this is interpretation. The 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.—Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis (*Ibid.*).

And so Nietzsche flexes his postmodern muscles. The subject-object dichotomy is passed by, in favor of a new perspectivism:

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' (*Ibid.*).

At this point, all of Nietzsche's statements have conditioned themselves. They now belong to the realm of *doxa*, of opinion—so what power do they hold? Nietzsche understands this objection all too well and is too much of a "philosopher of the dangerous maybe" (Cinelli, 43) to care. He does not philosophize with truth, rather, "with a hammer." He "sound[s] out idols, [. . .] which are . . . touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork." His perspectivism is at its most prominent: "There are more idols than realities in the world: that is my 'evil eye' for this world; that is also my 'evil ear.'" Even though the will to truth, in its self-consciousness and self-overcoming, has re-valued itself to be a will to truth in which the value of truth can no longer be unconditional, it still survives—not on a meaningless plane of opinion, but rather on the most evident of planes: *on the surface*.

Dynamic Appearance as the "Location" of Meaning

The idea that the will to truth in which truth has a conditional value resides on the surface cannot stand on a refutation of metaphysics alone. It must be based on a sort of metaphysics of *physis* itself. Nietzsche does in fact provide such a metaphysic, and it arises out of the Apollinian/Dionysian dichotomy he introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

A comprehensive outline of Nietzsche's argument is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will merely summarize the work of Drew A. Hyland in his essay, "Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Aesthetic Justification of Life" (59-60). Hyland states that Nietzsche's general metaphysical situation follows thus: the Dionysian truth about life, namely that the self-annihilating immersion of all things in unity is intolerable, may be rendered tolerable by creating ways to veil the intolerability of this truth. Every attempt to make life tolerable or justifiable is in fact the creation of some such veil and springs from the Apollinian spirit, the "*principium individuationis*." The highest, most self-conscious exemplar of this creation of tolerance-rendering illusion is art. Dionysian tragic artists are those who self-consciously recognize the tragic basis of what they are doing. It is for this reason that Nietzsche emphasizes that "the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (*BT*, 22).

From this metaphysic—objections aside—it is plain that for Nietzsche, the highest value is no longer truth, understanding, or (to the Utilitarian's dismay) happiness, but rather *creativity*. Since the veil must be created to insure the entity's being, creativity becomes the new standard by default.

Now, creativity necessarily presupposes a creator, but Nietzsche has abolished the truth value of the idea that subjects exist which would create in order to retain their subjectivity. It is in response to this problem that Nietzsche pre-figures so much of postmodern thought: his awareness of greater systems and his insight into the human condition as characterized by health as a greater force of becoming leads him to postulate, from his perspective, the will to power. He offers up, in a continuation of his aforementioned perspectivism passage in *The Will to Power*, the following as the last spoke in his wheel of perspectivist epistemology:

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 (*WP*, 267).

The Will to Power as Determinant of Meaning Through Appearance

Nietzsche's conception of the will to power is difficult to grasp. The following passage constitutes Nietzsche's own attempt at an explanation:

The victorious concept 'force,' by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be completed: an inner will must be ascribed to it, which I designate as 'will to power,' i.e., as an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive, etc. (*Ibid.*, 332-3).

Nietzsche is speaking from an acquiescence to the mechanistic interpretation of the world, which, he states, "seems today to stand victorious in the foreground." Regardless of whether or not Nietzsche understood the science of his day, the concept of the will to power holds significance in that it is a wholly new philosophical discovery and one that fits nicely into Nietzsche's perspectival schema. Poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze attempts to elaborate on this concept:

The will to power is ascribed to force, but in a very special way: it is both a complement of force and something internal to it. It is not ascribed to it as a predicate. . . . [It is] the genealogical element of force (Deleuze, 49-50).

It is important to note that Nietzsche by no means made an exception of the mechanistic interpretation of the world from his perspectivism; he states that "mechanistic theory is already a translation into the sense language of man" (*WP*, 338). Nietzsche's metaphysical "creator" is thus already being created, and in that sense may be relegated to the realm of opinion once again. However, this curiosity fits Nietzsche's project perfectly, for it is an interpretation that is honest in its interpretiveness, in addition to functioning as the engine of the singularly demonstrable standard of creativity. Through the will to power, the entire picture of a life lived aesthetically becomes the best one for the truthful expression of the will to truth because appearance holds the most meaning; it is where we are most actively meaningful.

Hannah Arendt notes the work of the Swiss biologist and zoologist Adolf Portmann as a contribution to this reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy in her book *The Life of the Mind*. Against a strictly Darwinistic interpretation of appearance, which states that appearance in living beings serves the dual-purposes of self-preservation and preservation of the species, Portmann's research has

suggested that the inner organs exist only in order to bring forth and maintain appearances: "Prior to all functions for the purpose of preservation of the individual and the species . . . we find the simple fact of appearing as self-display *that makes these functions meaningful*" (Arendt, 27¹). Arendt follows these findings to a familiar conclusion:

These findings suggest that the predominance of the outside appearance implies, in addition to the sheer receptivity of our senses, a spontaneous activity: *whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear wants to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched*. It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear* . . . (Arendt, 29).

Into this biological standpoint, Nietzsche's exhortation of the +- value of the surface fits seamlessly, since the organs of knowledge have thus far functioned exclusively by interpreting the way things have presented themselves to them.

This is not to say that the scientist and theoretician should be denied their activities just because they place a + value on the uncovered and speculative. Reason services some of our most basic human needs, as Nietzsche points out:

The inventive force that invented categories labored in the service of our needs, namely our need for security, for quick understanding on the basis of signs and sounds, for means of abbreviation (WP, 277).

It is only when these interpretations masquerade as metaphysical truths that they become decadent.

Conclusion

To sum up Nietzsche's conception of the creative value of appearance and how it would manifest itself as a distinctly human will to truth, I quote from the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*:

¹ Arendt quotes from Portmann, *Das Tier als soziales Wesen*, Zürich, 1953, p. 252; italics added by Arendt.

And for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to 'truth at any price,' this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too profound. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything, or to understand and 'know' everything. . . . Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity (*GS*, 38).

Thus Nietzsche paints his picture of the will to truth as it has been revalued according to the new epistemic standard of creativity arisen from the will to power.

In my view, Nietzsche ultimately offers up the will to power as an alternative to nihilism. Insofar as this concept attempts to be an explanation of the "way things are," it fails miserably: Nietzsche was no scientist, and his analysis of the Dionysian/Apollinian dichotomy as a metaphysic of creativity seems strained. However, insofar as the will to power attempts to be a philosophical hammer, sounding out idols and exhorting us to re-value all values from a distinctly human perspective, it proves to be a smashing success.

Nihilism, as we rationally understand the concept, still survives outside of Nietzsche's relativistic system. However, through the alternative of the will to power and the epistemic standard of creativity, Nietzsche has at least offered us a choice, an either/or proposition—perhaps the most fundamental one: "Either abolish your reverences or—yourselves!" (*Ibid.*, 287). Nothing or Creativity. As a human being, I choose the latter, and therein lies Nietzsche's subtle exhortation.

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