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Nietzsche's Perspective: Beyond Truth as an Ideal

by Maureen Finnigan

Controversy encumbers the philosophy of Nietzsche regarding his notions of truth and reality: whether he affirms or denies truth; whether truth is metaphysical, empirical, relative, or pragmatic; and whether reality can be known or is beyond our experience. I maintain that Nietzsche does not eradicate truth and reality. If he did, why would we bother to read his works, as his own philosophy would then not be *true*? Rather than abolishing truth and reality, Nietzsche brings them back to life. When truth is returned to life—from exile, beyond the world—it no longer *fits* within the doctrines of Truth instituted in relation to the ideal of a beyond. Nietzsche redefines truth and reality from within life, because he does not believe truth is separate from this world or reality is outside experience. Nietzsche puts forth his philosophy, which is his perspective from inside the world, of the truth and reality of the human condition. Nietzsche does not delimit, conceptualize, or thematize truth, nor does he believe truth is waiting to be uncovered, unmasked, or discovered. Truth is not static, but dynamic; it is not a structure underlying the world, but a style of life. Within the game of life, truth is at stake. It is a stake, a wager, a venture, a risk that one continuously makes throughout one's life.

Much debate surrounds Nietzsche's notions of truth¹ because he does not neatly fit into the established categories and theories of truth. Nietzsche cannot be easily placed among the metaphysicians, rationalists, irrationalists, empiricists, or relativists, for example. He cannot be simply characterized as a proponent of the correspondence, coherence, or pragmatist theories of truth. Nietzsche aims to overcome the divisions and oppositions upon which such classifications are instituted. Nietzsche's reproach of philosophy, religion, and science as false and opposite truth and reality illustrate his attempts to move *beyond* both conceptualizations of Truth and Reality² as absolute, and oppositions such as True and apparent, Being and becoming, rational and sensual, subjective and objective.

The truth Nietzsche vindicates is not metaphysical. Nietzsche renounces all metaphysical Truths as illusory, because they deny life through the avowal of a transcendental ideal beyond life. None of Nietzsche's truth claims are transcendent, as he makes no reference to truths beyond life, nor does he stand beyond life to assert truths about the world. All his assertions are presented as interpretations from a perspective within the world, not as absolute or ideal Truths. Nietzsche asserts that truth is not independent of the life we live and reality is not external to our experience, as idealism holds;³ truth and reality are not subjectively ascertained through the intellect, as modern philosophy surmises; nor are truth and reality imposed on the world externally, as scientists deduce.

Although the search for truth outside life commences with the Socratic inquiry for knowledge *itself*, (counter to particular objects of knowledge or sorts of knowledge), as immortalized in the Platonic dialogues, it does not end with Platonism or Idealism or metaphysics or Christianity. The project of the Enlightenment perpetuates the conjecture of Truth as an ideal beyond life through the belief in complete rationality, comprehensive totality, and an ultimate aim. Nietzsche denies that

¹ For an account of interpretations and criticisms of Nietzsche's notion of truth, see Maude-marie Clark, *Nietzsche: On Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

² My use of ideal Truth and pure Reality refers to a metaphysical concept of truth and reality as transcendental, pure, absolute, and universal, such as, the "True world" in contrast to the merely "apparent world," in which we live, or the Kantian thing-in-itself. When Truth, Reality, and Being are referred to as ideal, pure, and absolute, I have capitalized them, in order to distinguish these conceptualizations from Nietzsche's own notion of truth and reality which deny a beyond in which Truth, Reality, and Being dwell or a beyond from which we can discern the Truth and Reality of the world as a comprehensive totality.

³ Within idealism, I join Nietzsche in grouping together Platonism, Christianity, metaphysics, and Kantian transcendental idealism, as well as all other philosophical dualisms.

truth and reality exist beyond the world in which we reside or that there is a beyond from which the truth and reality of the world can be discerned. Nietzsche recognizes himself as the “first honest spirit in the history of the spirit, the spirit in whom truth comes to judgment on the false coinage of four millennia.”⁴ He declares: this “old truth is coming to an end.”⁵

Our senses and the experiences of our lives are the sole testimony of truth and reality, according to Nietzsche. “All credibility, all good conscience, all evidence of truth come only from the senses.”⁶ But, truth is not empirical in the traditional sense. Our ideas are not empty receptacles waiting to be filled with collected data immediately received through the senses or directly derived from experience. Nietzsche strikes down such metaphors, because they sketch a picture of knowledge as reactive, whereas it is active. A lesson to the scientists, (which Nietzsche offers to psychologists in particular): “Never to observe in order to observe! This gives a false perspective, leads to squinting and something forced and exaggerated. Experience as the wish to experience does not succeed.”⁷ Truth does not exist in the world for an uncommitted observer to sight or a neutral arbiter to ascertain.

The empirical model of truth as well as the correspondence theory of truth uphold the ideal of objectivity that Nietzsche endeavors to overthrow. The objective man is vacant—“a mobile pot for forms that still has to wait for some content and substance in order to ‘shape’ itself accordingly—for the most part, a man without substance and content.”⁸ Nietzsche’s notion of truth calls for a move beyond the subject-object-predicate relation *as objective*. The self is not a separate, independent subject capable of objectively, impartially, neutrally, or unconditionally explaining the world as object because the self is involved in the world, not free from it. The explanation by a subject of an object, as well as the correspondence of one thing to another, presupposes the independence of those two entities.

There is no such thing as the objective correspondence of the ideas of an individual to reality, not only because the individual is involved in the world and there-

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House [Vintage Books], 1966), 88.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 517.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 128.

fore is not impartial, but also because ideas are integrated within the individual and therefore are not unconditioned. Reason is not autonomous, but convoluted. Thinking is not simply comprised of reason, but is an aggregate of instincts, drives, passions, emotions, will—and *reason*. Nietzsche queries, “to eliminate the will, to suspend the emotions altogether, provided it could be done—surely this would be to castrate the intellect, would it not?”⁹ The individual is not independent of the world, and, analogously, the thinker is not separate from his/her thoughts.

As truth is not objective, in like manner, it is not subjective. Since thinking is not wholly rational, disconnected from the body, or independent of the world, the subjective perception, or conception, of truth through the intellect alone is impossible. “The ‘pure spirit’ is pure stupidity: if we subtract the nervous system and the senses—the ‘mortal shroud’—then we miscalculate—that is all!” Inasmuch as the individual is not independent from the world, one can neither subjectively nor objectively *explain* the world as if detached, but must *interpret* the world from within. Subjective and objective, like True and apparent, soul and body, thinking thing and material thing, intellect and sense, noumena and phenomena, are dualities that Nietzsche aspires to overcome. Thus, although Nietzsche is not a rationalist, this does not mean he falls into the irrationalist camp. He does not abolish reason but instead situates it within life, as an instrument, not as an absolute.

In a similar vein, Nietzsche subscribes to neither absolutism nor relativism. Truth presupposes a subject for whom it is true. In other words, the only truth is that which is true *for* someone. This implies that there is no such thing as pure forms or things-in-themselves that are true, but cannot be known. On the other hand, the fact that truth does not exist beyond life as an ideal or standard does not result in its collapse into relativism. Nietzsche proclaims the truths of others to be fallacious, thereby confirming that truth is not relative to either an individual or a community. Relativism implies that all views are equal, if not equally arbitrary. Since an individual is always invested in some standpoint, rather than free from all such outlooks, it is impossible to make a judgment regarding the equality of all viewpoints.

Truth is a function of life, but it is not exclusively pragmatic or utilitarian. Nietzsche opposes the Truths fabricated by the idealists and Christians (which are pragmatic insofar as they are life-preserving) to truth and reality, thus he affirms that pragmatism is not the solitary criteria for truth. The Truths enacted by the ide-

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 256.

idealists and Christians preserve the lives of those who do not possess the strength or courage to face truth, and, therefore, turn from reality and themselves toward the ideal. What could be more *useful* than sustaining life? What could *work* better than conserving humankind? What could be a greater good than keeping the greatest number of people alive? Nietzsche declares that the sustenance of life has been due to lies, not truth.

Neither usefulness nor pleasure is a basis for the demonstration of truth: "This is so far from the case that it almost furnishes a counterproof; in any event, the greatest suspicion of a 'truth' should arise when feelings of pleasure enter the discussion of the question 'What is true?'"¹⁰ And, "one must never ask if the truth is useful."¹¹ Pleasure and utility are more likely to testify against, rather than for, truth, because the search for truth entails tremendous hardship. "At every step one has to wrestle for truth; [truth] requires greatness of soul: the service of truth is the hardest service."¹²

Nietzsche describes the pursuit and discovery of truth, not as simple and easy, rather as the most arduous task, in the face of which most retreat. "Who alone has good reason to lie his way out of reality? He who suffers from it?"¹³ Everyone from Plato¹⁴ to the positivists¹⁵ has withdrawn from reality, running for cover, covering truth. Concealment of the truth involves abstracting from the transient world, subtracting from the variety of the world, as well as blanketing the world in a web of concepts. These fabrications and impositions of ideal Truth have excluded the possibility of exploring and affirming (Nietzsche's understanding of) *truth*. Such philosophical and scientific labors and their corresponding fruits do not reach below the surface, but construct a surface upon which they erect a haven from the truth. The surface is not the truth, but a symptom, a sign, of that in which one needs to believe. These truths "must be believed to be true, for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves; though they might, of course, be false judgments for all that!"¹⁶ Nietzsche's task is the destruction of Truths which are embedded in the

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 631.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 568.

¹² Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 631.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 577.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 559.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

nothingness beyond life and the overcoming of human beings who need these Truths to survive.

Nietzsche presents his perspective of the truth and reality of the human condition, asserting that his own philosophy is an *interpretation*¹⁷ from within life, not an *explanation* as though outside the world. Nietzsche vouches for his philosophy: “supposing that this also is only interpretation—and you will be eager enough to make this objection?—well, so much the better.”¹⁸ He professes, “Perspective [is] the basic condition of all life.”¹⁹ Nietzsche’s Hyperborean perspective is not outside the world but beyond the deception which has bewitched Western civilization for many, many centuries. Perspectives have been degraded throughout the history of philosophy as mere opinions or *doxa*, as a consequence of the exaltation of the ideal. Nietzsche assures us that ideal Truth and pure Reality are illusory, for they are utterly undemonstrable.²⁰ Inasmuch as absolute Truth and Reality are unsubstantiated conjectures of the human mind, we are left with our perspective, which is *not* then imperfect or inferior truth, but the *only truth*. The truth is a claim made by an individual from a context in life. Hence, Nietzsche does not deny truth or reality, but provides an interpretation that redefines them. The sole opportunity for truth and the only experience of reality are from an individual’s perspective within life.

Nietzsche returns truth to the world and translates man back into nature.²¹ This is not a return to a time before modern philosophy, Christianity, and Platonism, rather it is a “going back like anybody who wants to attempt a big jump.”²² Nietzsche wants to leap beyond the conceptualization of Truth that has resulted in the decline of humanity. All philosophies, religions, sciences and other ideologies that have organized life around the ideal of the beyond have done so at the cost of denying life and alienating humanity from natural instincts and drives. Through the perpetuation of Truth as an ideal beyond the world in which humanity lives, humankind has become less natural. Nietzsche unmasks idealism as a beautiful word for anti-natural.²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 484.

²¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 161–2.

²² Ibid., 224.

²³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 46.

The unnaturalness of idealism, whether that of a pure reality beyond life, a thing-in-itself or a purely rational human being, is that which Nietzsche wishes to invoke in his contrast of woman as more natural than man. Truth, wisdom, life, and eternity are personified as females by Nietzsche, thereby countering the moral archetype of the “good man” as well as the Enlightenment ideal of rational *man*. The anthropomorphic image of truth as a woman illustrates the incongruity of: truth and dogmatism, truth and pure rationality, truth and the good, truth and contemplation.

Supposing truth is a woman—what then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women? That the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth so far have been very awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart? What is certain is that she has not allowed herself to be won.²⁴

Truth has not been won on account of humanity not using the right approach and employing the wrong method. Truth eludes humankind because “what has hitherto been forbidden on principle has never been anything but the truth.”²⁵ The demarcation of Truth as ideal, pure, certain, wholly rational, systematic, and comprehensive—from Platonism through the Enlightenment—has depreciated and ostracized the true experiences of life. That which has been banned from the domain of Truth—our senses, our experiences, our perspective—is that which yields *truth*, according to Nietzsche. Whereas, that which has been presented as True is phantasmagoric.

Human beings impose their own truth on life instead of seeking truth within life. Zarathustra sings a dancing song in which life mocks Zarathustra as a symbol of humankind and the need to impose one's own virtues onto life:

Into your eyes I looked recently, O life! And into the unfathomable I then seemed to be sinking. But you pulled me out with a golden fishing rod; and you laughed mockingly when I called you unfathomable.

“Thus, runs the speech of all fish,” you said; “what they do not fathom is unfathomable. But I am merely changeable and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous—even if you men call me profound, faithful, eternal,

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 4.

and mysterious. But you men always present us with your own virtues, O you virtuous men!"²⁶

Insofar as the virtues, truths, ideals, and values humanity imposes on life are incongruous with life, a crisis is imminent. The value of these "values" dissolves when they no longer serve the function for which they were created—to order human life. As a consequence of the inability of the artificial order imposed upon the world to *order* the world, these values collapse into the nothingness on which they were originally founded. Nihilism, which Nietzsche denotes as the devaluation of the highest values, reigns. Nihilism characterizes the present state of humanity, toward which we have been spiraling since the institution of Truth, Reality, and Being outside the only world we can experience and, therefore, know. In other words, we have been tottering on the edge of nihilism since the establishment of Truth, beyond life, upon nothingness.

Reality is not beyond that which appears; inversely, reality appears. "Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play and changing of forms."²⁷ The world our senses experience is transient, variegated, multifarious, disparate, unsteady, and uncertain. The world of our experience, the world in which we live, the only world there is, according to Nietzsche, is the world of becoming and change, not Being and certainty. Nietzsche affirms "becoming with a radical rejection even of the concept 'being'."²⁸ "Whatever has being does not become; whatever becomes does not have being."²⁹ Nietzsche's metaphor of the "eternal recurrence" emphasizes that the world becomes, but does not become something. The world has neither a beginning nor an end, likewise no *telos*, or purpose. There is no beyond, and in that sense alone, the world is a whole. The world is not whole with regard to comprehensive totality or complete unity. There is nothing beyond the world, outside of human life, greater than humanity, that furnishes meaning, direction, design, or purpose.

Such claims about the human condition free humanity from the confines of ideal Truths and allow one to *live* rather than *end*, offer the chance to *affirm* life rather than impose *denial*, and open up the possibility to live according to values one *creates* rather than those *fixed* by idealism, Christianity, or science.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 220.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 491.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 51.

²⁹ See Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 479–481.

In order to discern truth, “one must be honest in matters of the spirit to the point of hardness.”³⁰ Honesty is the only virtue that remains for Nietzsche and those he identifies as “free spirits” or “true philosophers.” Not everyone is daring enough for it.

The predilection of strength for questions for which no one today has the courage; the courage for the forbidden; the predestination to the labyrinth. An experience of seven solitudes. New ears for new music. New eyes for what is most distant. A new conscience for truths that have so far remained mute.³¹

Not only those Nietzsche refers to as weak fear truth; all fear truth and suffer from it. However, strong individuals persist in the hunt for truth because their fervor for truth outweighs the hardship encompassed in the quest.

Recognition, affirmation of reality is for the strong man as great a necessity as is for the weak man, under the inspiration of weakness, cowardice and flight in the face of reality—the ‘ideal’.³²

Nietzsche foretells of philosophers who will be creators, legislators, commanders, experimenters, and attempters. Rather than running from reality or covering truth, it is essential to sojourn to heights and depths, for which few have the courage or vigor, in order to attain a greater perspective—higher, wider, deeper. Nietzsche calls for a revaluation of all values and the creation of new values from within life—values that are true to the real experiences of the human condition and that endeavor to affirm life and seek truth.

Truth is not conquered at the end of a battle. Truth is not a trophy one takes home at the end of a contest. The game of life does not end as a game of chess ends. Life itself is play and truth is at stake in the game of life.

The most spiritual human beings, if we assume that they are the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but just for that reason they honor life because it pits its greatest opposition against them.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 568.

³¹ Ibid., 568

³² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 50.

³³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 524.

And:

The genuine philosopher... feels the burden and the duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life—he risks himself constantly, he plays the wicked game.³⁴

It is *how you play* and *that you play* that matters. One must continue to play, not forfeit, but persevere in the pursuit of truth.

Truth cannot be seized, captured, and incarcerated in convictions and creeds. The true philosopher steps up and over convictions, rather than resting upon them or remaining within them. Zarathustra warns his weary shadow of surrendering to narrow truths: “Beware lest a narrow faith imprison you in the end—some harsh and severe illusion.”³⁵ Truths are narrow when they simplify, conceptualize, circumscribe, systematize, and, thereby, fix and falsify the experiences of our life. Truth, as Nietzsche delineates it, is not shallow or static, but abundant, dynamic, deep, and profound. Although one will never *get to the bottom of* truth, if one descends into the depths, one will not come up empty-handed, but with handfuls of gold.³⁶

The hermit... assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit... will doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have “ultimate and real” opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish “grounds.” Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy—that is a hermit’s judgment: “There is something arbitrary in his stopping here to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper here but laying his spade aside; there is also something suspicious about it.” Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word is also a mask...³⁷

...not because truth is hidden, but because it is not further pursued. Truth is not that which one conquers, rather it is a stake one continuously makes and affirms from within the context of one’s life.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 125.

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 387.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 5.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 229.