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Nietzsche's Critique of Truth

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1. Introduction¹

In several places Nietzsche calls into question the value of truth:

The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment.
[BGE 4]

At some places he disdains the desire for truth:

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. [GS Preface to the Second Edition 4]

At other places Nietzsche questions the very existence of truth²

There exists neither "spirit", nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth. [WTP 480]

Indeed he even claims that he does not use truth and reason to convince but rather seeks to "seduce" his readers through extreme rhetoric:

A powerful seduction fights on our behalf, the most powerful that there has ever been - the seduction of truth - "Truth"? Who has forced this word on me? But I repudiate it; but I disdain this proud word: no, we do not need even this: we shall conquer and come to power even without truth. The spell that fights on our behalf, the eye of Venus that charms and blinds even our opponents, is the magic of the extreme, the seduction that everything extreme exercises: we immoralists - we are the most extreme. [WTP 749]

To deny the existence of truth is prima facie paradoxical. Such denials invite the question "Is it true that there is no truth?". To answer 'Yes' is to claim there is at least one truth, namely that there is no truth. To answer 'No' is to deny that there is no truth and hence to commit oneself to the claim that there is some truth. To admit that one seeks influence not through truth but through seduction is prima facie to invite dismissal from the intellectual agenda. What then are we to make of Nietzsche's various pronouncements about truth? The simple answer is, I believe, that Nietzsche is ultimately not interested in (theories of) truth. This is not to say that Nietzsche is not acutely concerned with the role that the concept and rhetoric of truth has played within various cultures. By the same token an interest in the role the concept of witches played in 17th century English culture need not betoken any interest or belief in witches. Yet whether or not Nietzsche is ultimately interested in truth he has prima facie made some paradoxical claims about truth. In the following I attempt an interpretation of his various pronouncements about truth which I hope will remove that initial air of paradox. In so doing I hope to provide a general framework for Nietzsche interpretation.

¹ Citations from Nietzsche's works are by section numbers with abbreviations of the relevant title prefixed. A list of these abbreviations and the editions used is given in the bibliography at the end of this essay. In the case of *Ecce Homo* and Baeumler's edition of the *Collected Works* this method was inappropriate. For citations from *Ecce Homo* page numbers from the below listed translation are used. In citations from the Baeumler edition volume and page number are cited.

² This denial of the existence of truth can not be dismissed as mere hyperbole since it is repeated consistently. For instance, WTP notes 540, 616, 625 and 804.

Before beginning I should briefly digress to say a few words about an alternative, cognitivist approach taken, for instance most recently, by John Wilcox and Richard Schacht.³ According to this approach Nietzsche's contradictory remarks about truth can, to some degree, be reconciled by distinguishing various concepts of truth. Following Kant, or more recently, Putnam, we might distinguish the claim that our various theories are true of the transcendental world (Kant's world of noumena, what Putnam derisively labels "THE WORLD") from the claim that they are true of the world of appearances, the empirical world, the world as we experience it.⁴ The world of noumena is meant to exist independently of our experience of it, to be unconditioned by our categories. The empirical world is a world conditioned/made possible by prior categorization. We might thus seek to reconcile Nietzsche's various pronouncements about truth by claiming that his sceptical comments about truth concern the notion of transcendental truth, as in, "true to the world of noumena," while his own claims are taken as being true of the conditioned world of appearances. Such an interpretation, heavily reliant on the many Kantian elements found mainly in the Nachlass, can, I suppose, be made to gibe with much of Nietzsche's text. One problem with this interpretation is that it makes Nietzsche appear less interesting and original than he is. It gives us a Nietzsche who is merely rehashing familiar Kantian themes, minus the rigor of Kant's exposition. Of course Nietzsche, at times, and unlike Kant, takes a fairly sceptical line on the very notion of a noumenal world, a world of things-in-themselves, and denies the Kantian claim that certain categories are both a priori and inevitable. But these are moves long familiar from Hegel and other post-Kantians. A second problem with this interpretation is that it involves a certain insensitivity to the context of much of Nietzsche's writings on truth. It fails to consider who Nietzsche's various works were aimed at. In Nietzsche's published works his analyses of the notion of truth usually serve expressly polemical purposes. To treat Nietzsche as developing a philosophical account of the notion of truth is, to some degree, to ignore his expressly rhetorical intent of using his audiences received notions of truth in order to subvert their wider *Weltanschauung*. But more of this soon. For the moment suffice it to say that while I believe that the Kantian problematic was indeed an influence behind many of Nietzsche's pronouncements on truth, I will not here pursue this line because it has already received a thorough exposition in the works of the authors previously cited. In the following I will rather concentrate on the rhetorical function of Nietzsche's various apparently paradoxical pronouncements about truth, arguing that when seen in the light of their polemical intent they lose a good deal of the air of paradox.

2. Will to Truth as a Will To Impotence

In Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* [125] the story is told of a madman who rushes into a marketplace crying incessantly "I seek God! I seek God." His audience, being atheists, mock him asking "Did he lose his way?" etc. To this the madman replies "We have killed him. You and I." He then proceeds to ask a series of startling questions, "How could we

³ Cf. Wilcox (1982), especially chapters II, III and IV, and Schacht (1995), especially chapter 2.

⁴ For Putnam's recasting of the Kantian distinction between empirical and transcendental realism in terms of internal and metaphysical realism Cf. the last chapter of Putnam (1978).

drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?" And later he asks "How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" and "What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of the deed too great for us? Must we not become Gods simply to appear worthy of it?" Then looking at his audience who stare at him in astonished silence he proclaims "I have come too early . . . This tremendous event is still on its way . . .the light of stars requires time; deeds though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars - and yet they have done it themselves."

When the madman claims that this tremendous event is still on its way, etc, he is claiming that even the atheists do not appreciate the meaning of "the death of God." For God here is not merely the metaphysical underpinning of the Christian cosmology. He is the very notion of a basis, an external authority, on which opinions are founded - the very notion of a horizon against which everything can be seen and judged. Thus it is that the madman suggests that we must become gods to be worthy of our deed. That is to say that we must become our own authorities, our own basis. To become Gods is, in part, to forgo the balm of deferred responsibility. According to Nietzsche, a primary function of the invocation of God is the provision of a means of escaping responsibility. For the Christian the world, including himself, is a product of the will of God. Truth, reality, is founded in God for the world is God's word. Typically atheists, having rejected God as the basis of all values and belief, supply a new basis. For instance, positivists take experience to be the ultimate justifier of our beliefs. Utilitarians and Socialists take the summum bonum as the grounding for all actions. Nietzsche rejects these new gods as further attempts to evade responsibility for one's beliefs and actions. The mechanics of evasion are simple. In response to the question "Why do you think suicide is wrong?" the Christian answers, "Because the Bible says so!" In response to the question "Why is punishment of criminals justified?" the utilitarian answers, "Because it promotes the summum bonum." In response to the question "Why do you believe in the existence of everyday physical objects?" the positivists answers, "On the authority of sensory experience." In each case what is being denied is the effect of the individual will. In effect the interlocutor is saying, I do not believe this because I choose to, because this kind of belief suits me [cf. section 4 below], I believe this because that is how things are and hence I cannot choose otherwise and neither can you. To become Gods is, in part, to forgo the balm of deferred responsibility. According to Nietzsche, the invocation of God, the summum bonum, the senses, are merely vehicles of escape. Indeed the very notion of truth must be added to the list. Who does not claim to believe what he believes because it is the truth? Not because he wishes to believe but because that is how things are even though he might wish them to be otherwise. As Nietzsche observes, "One positively wants to repudiate one's own authority and assign it to circumstances" [WTP 422].

This resignation of responsibility does not merely provide comfort. It is an indispensable rhetorical device in the subjugation of others. How much less convincing it is to say "Do so because I wish you to do it," than to command "Do it because it is God's Will!" How much less convincing to say "Believe because I will you to believe " rather than "You must believe because it is the truth, because that's the way the world is." Thus Nietzsche claims,

Belief is always most desired, most pressingly needed, where there is a lack of will . . . that is to say, the less a person knows how to command, the more urgent is his desire for that which commands, and commands sternly, -- a God, prince, caste, physician, father confessor, dogma, or party conscience. [G.S. 347]

Here then we have one of the motivations for Nietzsche's attack on truth: The notion of truth is used to escape responsibility for one's actions and beliefs and is employed as a means of coercing uniformity of belief. This is not to say that Nietzsche was against all coercion. Rather, one might say, he was against the coercion of all. This theme is dealt with in detail in section 5. below.

It is worth digressing here to note that I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche has a voluntaristic conception of belief, ala Sartre. Nietzsche, as a naturalist, takes all our beliefs to be thoroughly conditioned. The point is that give our beliefs we can choose to make them our own, that is even accepting that they are conditioned by various causal factors, we can choose to take responsibility for accepting them. And is this choosing to become what you are also not a matter of causal conditioning? It is precisely because it is that motivates Nietzsche's effort. For Nietzsche's writings are themselves another part of the earthly causal order, and as such, may well influence many of his readers to take responsibility for their beliefs rather than deferring to some presumed higher authorities.⁵

3. Being Vs. Becoming, Description Vs. Prescription

Together with the traditional notion of truth comes the notion of beliefs as reports on an antecedently existing reality. According to this realist notion of truth, a belief is true if it adequately reflects reality, if it describes things the way they are. On this model the ideal believer is a disinterested, passive entity who is merely reflecting the antecedently existing order, an order that is not of his making and hence an order for which he is not responsible. The ideal believer is one who extricates himself from worldly involvement in order to achieve an objective perspective, a God's view. In its extreme form, as developed by Plato, this ideal believer transcends the illusory world of appearance to achieve true knowledge of the unchanging eternal forms. For Nietzsche, Christianity and Platonism are equivalent in their rejection of this world, the world of appearance, the world of becoming, in favor of an alleged higher order, an alleged world of being.

According to Nietzsche, believing is not some privileged activity by which we transcend the apparent world to achieve a God-like harmony with the real order of eternal truths. As a naturalist he sees belief as another human activity, another tool for survival, for manipulating the world to suit "our interests." In believing we are not reporting how the world is; rather, we are prescribing a way of looking at the world, a means for furthering a particular form of life. To bring others to share one's views is not to bring them into harmony with the pre-existing order it is to create the very order one is allegedly describing:

Will to truth is a making firm, a making true durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. "Truth" is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process. [WTP 552]

⁵ This paragraph owes much to conversations with Mark Migotti. For more on Nietzsche's notion of becoming what you are, see Nehamas (1983).

While truth is always created rather than discovered, by pretending otherwise man escapes the responsibility of authorship and paves the way for the passive acceptance of received views. Real philosophers, according to Nietzsche, explicitly take up the task of creation:

Genuine philosophers, however, are commanders and legislators: they say, "thus it shall be" Their "knowing" is creating, their creation is a legislation, their will to truth is-will to power. [BGE 211]

While Nietzsche says that all will to truth is a will to power, in the case of his "genuine philosophers" it is a will to power that recognizes itself as such. In the case of others, for instance, Christians, it is, according to Nietzsche, a will that does not recognize itself as a will to power, preferring to hide itself with a pretense of disinterested passive objectivity.

Here then is a second strand in Nietzsche's critique of truth: Taking something as true is exhibiting a will to create or to maintain prior creations though it is usually deceptively presented as an attempt to describe independent antecedently existing phenomena. This is not to say that Nietzsche is against all forms of deception. Indeed we shall soon see that he regards deception as an inevitable part of life.

4. Why not Untruth rather than Truth?

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, among other places, Nietzsche raises the question of the value of truth:

For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness and lust. [BGE 2]

The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species cultivating. [BGE 4]

What we need to note here is the separating of the pragmatic question of the usefulness of a judgment from the question of its truth value. Philosophers have tended to assume that the fact that a judgment is in the long run useful in helping us order and predict our experience and/or increasing our survival prospects is strong evidence that the judgment is true. Yet Nietzsche rejects this alleged link:

... a belief, however necessary it may be for the preservation of a species, has nothing to do with truth. [WTP 487]

In this light Nietzsche's rejection of the importance of truth is not so startling. After all, who but an ascetic fanatic would choose to have true but perhaps life-destroying beliefs over false but life-enhancing beliefs?⁶ Nietzsche, like many modern philosophers of science, claims there is no clear connection between truth and various pragmatic virtues.⁷ Once we separate the question of pragmatic virtues from the question of truth the property of truth loses its importance. Indeed if pragmatic virtues are no guide to truth it would seem that truth is unobtainable - for how could we ever recognize it - and hence doubly unworthy of our interest.

⁶ Actually, this seems to have been a possibility taken rather seriously by the early Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

⁷ For instance, cf. Van Fraassen (1980), p. 4, 87, 88 and 90.

Nietzsche uses this divorce to raise another serious question totally ignored by modern philosophers from Kant to later day scientific realists: Why value the pragmatic features we do in fact (explicitly or implicitly) value? For instance, in theory choice certain pragmatic features - conservatism, simplicity, generality - are said to be valued because they are indicators of truth. Yet if, as Nietzsche maintains, this is not so, this opens up the possibility of favoring alternative pragmatic features. The Christian perspective, the socialist perspective, might be useful for furthering particular kinds of life, a particular type of man. Yet, asks Nietzsche, is that the type of life we wish to promote? This theme will be pursued in section 7. below.

Nietzsche is not merely a sceptic who questions the link between utility and truth. In fact he positively suggests that utility and truth are inversely linked;

Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive. [WTP 493]

By "Truth" Nietzsche here presumably means that which is taken to be true. Thus he is here saying that what we take to be true, that is, that which is "species" preserving, is a kind of error. Yet in what sense is that which is taken to be true an error? Is it an error in the realist sense of being an inaccurate description of the facts? Such an interpretation seems ruled out by Nietzsche's rejection of the notion of facts:

... facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. [WTP 481]

The clue to this problem is to be found in Nietzsche's contention that all judgments involve life preserving simplifications;

The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification - directed not at knowledge but at taking possessions of things. [WTP 503]

Through such simplifications we create a manageable world. But in so doing we must, at least at the moment of making the judgment, ignore alternative simplifications that would result in other worlds. And usually we insist that all opposing views are false.

Here then is a third strand in Nietzsche's critique of truth:

By overestimating the importance of truth we fail to recognize the primary dynamic importance of ideas as vehicles for promoting and stultifying various forms of life.

5. Nietzsche's War on the Unconditional

If we follow Nietzsche in regarding beliefs and values as adaptive equipment we should acknowledge that like all such equipment they may in changing circumstances lose their beneficial effects. The utility of beliefs and values will vary over both people and times.

An idea that may be suitable for one type of person may at the same time be stultifying for another:

What serves the higher type of man as nourishment or delectation must also be the poison for a very different and inferior type. The virtues of the common man might signify vices and weakness in a philosopher. [BGE 30]

This is the basis of Nietzsche's vehement rejection of what he calls "the worst of tastes the taste for the unconditional" [BGE 31]. It is this tendency towards the unconditional, towards the notion that what is good for one is good for all, that Nietzsche identifies as the heart of all moralities [cf., for instance, BGE 198, A 9]. Nietzsche is wary of the unconditional because it serves to make one standard, usually the mediocre standard of the herd, fit all.

If we agree that an idea that is useful for some individuals might be stultifying for others we will, by the same token, allow that an idea that at one time proves useful for an individual might at another time be stultifying for that same individual. This claim it is well exemplified by Nietzsche's attitude towards his own ideas. He does not treat his ideas as permanent positions reached at the end of painstaking and comprehensive inquiries. Rather he treats them as experiments and temporary expedients:⁸

For me they were steps, I Have climbed upon them - therefore I had to pass over them. But they thought I wanted to settle down on them... [TI, Maxims and Arrows, 42]

They ["our accidental position"] serve us as hostels for the night, which a wanderer needs and accepts - we beware of settling down. [WTP 132]

At times we see certain solutions of problems that inspire faith in us; some call them henceforth their "convictions". Later - we see them only as steps to self knowledge, signposts to the problem we are . . . [BGE 231]

Nietzsche rejects the notion of unconditional truth, the notion that if an idea is true for one it is true for everyone at all times.

Yet there are texts that apparently belie this claim. For instance in *The Will to Power* we read:

. . . we demand that the herd morality be held sacred *unconditionally*. [132 - emphasis mine]

In fact such texts attest to Nietzsche's ultimate consistency on this question. To claim that everyone (at all times) should reject the notion of unconditional truth is to make an unconditional statement. Hence if we truly accept it then we must reject it. Indeed Nietzsche demonstrates a shrewd awareness of the paradoxical nature of an unconditional rejection of the unconditional when he writes:

Every morality is, as opposed to *laissez aller*, a bit of tyranny against "nature"; also against reason; but this in itself is no objection, as long as we do not have some other morality which permits us to decree that every kind of tyranny and unreason is impermissible. [BGE 188]

Presumably Nietzsche the amoralist does not have such an alternative morality. Indeed, in as much as the term "morality" has a pejorative sense for Nietzsche it is to be understood as referring to such universal prescriptions.

Nietzsche is quite content that certain people, for instance "tame Christians," accept the notion of unconditional truth. It is worth noting that in the passage from *The Will to Power* quoted above that though Nietzsche demands that the herd morality be held sacred unconditionally he does not demand that everyone hold it sacred unconditionally. Presumably he does not himself hold it sacred and clearly he does not intend his "free spirits" to themselves subscribe to herd morality. What Nietzsche is demanding is that members of the herd hold herd morality to be sacred unconditionally. Thus he says

⁸ This raises the question of how Nietzsche wishes his (ideal) audience to receive his views. After all, if he sees his various claims as merely temporary steps, it would be somewhat incongruous for him to desire that his audience be wholly and permanently convinced of the truth of those claims. This question is addressed at the end of section 6. below.

The ideas of the herd should rule in the herd - but not reach out beyond it. [WTP 287]

The unconditional, absolutist morality of the herd provides herd members with a perspective whereby they can tolerate their lives and in so doing makes them manageable. The notion that there is universal right and wrong is intrinsic to the Christian faith. That faith was necessary for certain great individuals to arise (including, presumably, Nietzsche himself) and is for certain weak wills still a necessary condition of existence.

Nietzsche's rejection of the unconditional is itself a conditional rejection. He wants those who are capable of greater life and who are hampered by the notion of unconditional truth to dispense with that notion, to no longer feel its constraints. Yet he is happy that lesser mortals should remain with their unconditional truths. Thus it is that he does not reject Christianity *in toto*:

To ordinary human beings, finally - the vast majority who exist for service and the general advantage, and may exist only for that - religion give an inestimable contentment with their situation and type. . . Perhaps nothing in Christianity and Buddhism is as venerable as their art of teaching even the lowest how to pace themselves through piety in an illusory higher order and thus to maintain their contentment with the real order, in which their life is hard enough - and precisely this hardness is necessary. [BGE 61]

Thus it is that he says:

What I fight against: that an exceptional type should make war on the rule - instead of grasping that the continued existence of the rule is the precondition for the value of the exception. [WTP 894]

Nietzsche's rejection of the unconditional is not based on the belief that everything unconditional is false. Nor is it based on the belief that everything unconditional represents a self-deception, a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations. According to Nietzsche self-deception is an inevitable part of life. Nietzsche's primary complaint against the unconditional is that it serves to promote the interests of average men, the herd, over the development of great individuals.

More generally, when Nietzsche rails against the unconditional, metaphysics, truth, we would do realize this is not an unconditional rejection. For instance, against the Heideggerian claim that Nietzsche sought to end all metaphysics we might say that Nietzsche merely desired that particular metaphysical notions, for instance the Christian cosmology, be abandoned.⁹ More accurately, he desired that they be abandoned by certain types of people. But this is not to say that Nietzsche desired to be permanently rid of all metaphysics. Certainly Nietzsche sees every metaphysics as a deception, a lie. Yet, as noted above, Nietzsche does not claim that falsity, self-deception, are vices to be avoided at all costs (cf. also GS 344). Indeed, since he claims "untruth is a condition of life" (BGE 4) and maintains that he is the one true life affirming spirit, he is, in some ways, committed to affirming the false, that is, in every act of speaking he is involved in promoting a perspective that promotes his ideal kind of life, at the price of thereby suppressing other, possibly, equally valid perspectives. As Nietzsche himself so dramatically puts it, "Enough, I am alive; and life has not been devised by morality: it wants deception, it lives on deception (HH, Preface, 1). For Nietzsche the desire to escape illusion is a desire to escape life. It is no more than a return to the ascetic ideal

⁹ Cf. Heidegger (1971), chapter 1, especially pp. 3-6.

(cf. GM,III,250. It is typical of the members of the priestly caste and their successors, the professional scholars, to regard the inevitability of error as a tragedy. Nietzsche is not committed to the elimination of metaphysics, to the elimination of "error qua error". What he does desire is that certain metaphysical notions that retard individuals, not be universally adhered to.

6. Nietzsche's Values

In his rejection of dogma and the unconditional Nietzsche is a would-be liberator. Yet what sets him so far apart from many of his modern democratic counterparts is that he seeks to liberate only those few he regards as fit for liberation --presumably those who are capable of arising above the herd and becoming truly "free spirits." Nietzsche does not reject ideas because he regards them as false. Thus he says of Christian morality " . . . it is not error as error that horrifies me at this sight." [GM p.332]. Nietzsche rejects certain interpretations because of their stultifying effects. Thus he says:

The whole absurd residue of Christian fable, conceptual cobweb spinning and theology does not concern us, it could be a thousand times more absurd and we would not lift a finger against it. . . . What is it we combat in Christianity? That it wants to break the strong. [WTP 252]

Similarly, in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche, after putting the rhetorical question "Is there any difference whatever between a lie and a conviction?" [A 55], tells us:

Ultimately the point is to what end a lie is told. That 'holy' ends are lacking in Christianity is my objection to its means. Only bad ends: the poisoning, slandering, denying of life, contempt for the body, the denigration and self-violation of man through the concept of sin - consequently its means too are bad. [A 56 -emphasis Nietzsche's]

Nietzsche's attack on Christianity is based on the fact that it enfeebles strong wills, not that it is false. Thus after characterizing the popular notion of God as "a crime against life" Nietzsche, with typical hyperbole, exclaims "If this God of the Christians were proved to us to exist we should know even less how to believe in him" [A 47]. That Christianity enfeebles is not a point of logic but a psychological observation. It is possible that Christianity could serve to help certain individuals achieve a great destiny; indeed it has so served. Yet in the modern era this is rarely the case. Rather it functions more to retard greatness in certain individuals who but for religious influence might have been thoroughly remarkable.¹⁰ For Nietzsche Christianity has in this sense outlived its time. Part of Nietzsche's project is to combat this stultifying effect. In the *Genealogy of Morals* he places Christianity as a merely historical phenomena arising from the exigencies of particular circumstances. In so doing he allows his readers a perspective from which the dictates of the Christian world view will no longer appear as eternal imperatives.

And what of those for whom Christianity is the highest form of life possible? First, such individuals are unlikely to be among Nietzsche's readers. Second, they are not particularly likely to be affected by his writings. And finally, Nietzsche is not concerned with catering to what he takes to be mediocre forms of life.

¹⁰ One of Nietzsche's favorite, though highly implausible examples of such retardation is the case of Pascal. I say implausible because it seems to me that the very fact that Pascal took Christianity so seriously is the route of his extraordinary thought.

Nietzsche not only refuses to reject ideas simply because he takes them to be false. He questions the very enterprise of seeking truth:

Reverence for truth is already the consequence of an illusion . . . one should value more than truth the force that forms, simplifies, shapes, invents. [WTP 602]

For Nietzsche truth and falsity are simply not the issues. What he is concerned about is "cultivating the plant man":

A doctrine is needed powerful enough to work as a breeding agent. [WTP 862]

This talk of cultivating the plant man and of breeding agents does not give a very clear picture of what Nietzsche does value. Clearly he values the cultivation of great individuals over the happiness of what he disparagingly calls "the herd" [cf., for example, WTP 766, BGE 126,258]. But what is a great individual and how is one to become one? Nietzsche is occasionally willing to cite examples, with Goethe and Napoleon figuring predominantly, but gives no general recipe. Yet, as Alexander Nehamas points out in his recent *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* this reticence is hardly surprising.¹¹ There is neither an informative general characterization of individual greatness nor a recipe for achieving it. Anything that could be captured by such a general characterization would hardly be uniquely individual. Rather than describing such an individual Nietzsche, through his writings, exemplifies one. This individual is not an example to be followed but an end in itself. Yet hopefully such an end might provoke other beings to become ends in themselves rather than mere herd animals.

Nietzsche did not seek pale imitators but bold innovators and experimenters. Thus his repeated claim that his words are intended only for select ears [For instance, cf. EH p211]. His own work was not intended to provide a body of truths to be built upon through further research. More appropriately his work was intended as a tool for liberation. As for the liberated it is up to them to create their own individuality. Thus Zarathustra's fatal words:

This - is now my way: where is yours? [Z, "Of the Spirit of Gravity", 2].

7. Nietzsche's Language

A lot has been made and said of Nietzsche's language and often in the way of apologia by those who would seek to reclaim Nietzsche to the scholarly fold. On this view Nietzsche's language is to be seen as an unfortunate excess. Against this trend Nehamas suggests that Nietzsche's eccentric style, or, more accurately, Nietzsche's eccentric styles, serve an expressly ideological purpose:¹² They highlight the fact that Nietzsche's views are exactly that, his views, one perspective among many competing equally worthy alternatives.¹³ As Nehamas points out, it would be both self-defeating and boring for Nietzsche to continually preface all his contentions with disclaimers such as "the following is merely my view." Instead Nietzsche alerted his readers to this fact by his use of various writing styles which, by their very literary nature, serve to constantly bring before the reader the fact that he is hearing one man's voice. Where others use a self-effacing

¹¹ Nehamas(1985),Cf. pp.229-235.

¹² Cf. Nehamas (1985), chapter 1.

¹³ This is not to claim that all perspectives are equally worthy. Nietzsche is only claiming that no perspective is to be unconditionally preferred over all others.

measured scholarly style, implicitly suggesting that theirs is the voice of a universal reason, Nietzsche uses loud, bombastic self-advertising tropes.

I believe Nehamas provides a useful corrective to those interpretations which treat Nietzsche's rhetoric as a mere character flaw to be excused. Yet, as Nehamas says, while his analysis does explain why Nietzsche uses a multiplicity of styles and why he uses such writerly styles and tropes, it does not explain why he uses the particular styles and tropes he does employ. In the rest of this section I examine a few of his most prevalent metaphors and attempt to show how they augment the general interpretation I have been developing.

When we turn to Nietzsche's language we find two types of metaphors particularly striking and pervasive, namely martial and organic metaphors. Repeatedly, where others talk of arguing against and refuting ideas, Nietzsche talks of making war on and annihilating ideas. In *Ecco Homo* Nietzsche talks of "overthrowing idols" [EH p.218], and tells us that he conceives of his kind of philosopher "as a terrible explosive" [EH p.281]. Continuing this use of martial metaphors he talks of his "campaign against morality" [EH p.291] and of Zarathustra's, and implicitly his, virtue of shooting well with arrows [EH p.328]. In *Twilight of the Idols*, subtitled "How to Philosophize with a Hammer" [emphasis mine] he tells us "This little book is a declaration of war" [p.22]. In the same place he disparages dialectics as "the last ditch weapon in the hands of those who have no other weapon left" [pp. 31-32 emphasis Nietzsche's]. In *The Antichrist* he repeatedly makes declarations of war [pp. 120,123].

Of his organic metaphors amongst the most sustained is his continual talk of poisons, infections, antidotes and healing. Thus he talks of Wagner as an "antitoxin against everything German" [EH p.249] and in *Human, All too Human*, of putting to an end "all my infections with 'higher swindle', 'idealism'" [EH p. 288]. In *The Gay Science* he tells us:

Every philosophy, every art may be regarded as a healing and helping appliance in the service of growing and struggling life: that always presupposes suffering and sufferers [370].

In *Twilight of the Idols* he exclaims "The doctrine of equality! . . . But there exists no more poisonous poison" [p.102] and characterizes Thucydides as a "cure for all Platonism" [p.106]. In *The Antichrist* he describes "the theological blood" in philosophy as a "poison" that "extends much further than one thinks" [p.119]. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he says:

What serves the higher type of men as nourishment or delectation must also be poison for a very different and inferior type. [30]

Amongst his favorite metaphors perhaps the most vivid are the forensic where he combines the martial and the organic. A case in point is his repeated characterizing of his kind of philosophy as a knife wielding surgery promoting health through the dissecting and cutting out of stultifying ideas [cf. BGE 210,211 and A 7]. Thus he says, "I do not refute ideals, I merely put on gloves before them" [EH 218].

These various metaphors serve a number of interconnected purposes. They help emphasize that Nietzsche is not interested in the scholarly world of measured reasoning aimed at eternal truths. Rather he wishes to affect and promote earthly life. Characteristically philosophers have taken the mind and reason, the world of the intellect, to be separate from the body and other earthly encumbrances. By characterizing beliefs as weapons aimed at achieving various effects, as poisons capable of destroying life, Nietzsche is providing a language which allows us to refer to the mental without implicitly

accepting that it is divorced from the physical. These dynamic metaphors emphasize Nietzsche's characterization of ideas as tools aimed at specific effects as opposed to the traditional picture of ideas as disinterested replicas of an alleged pre-existing order. The intellect, according to Nietzsche, is not a bridge to the heaven of objectivity and Godliness but merely another factor in the earthly causal order. Through his use of organic and martial metaphors Nietzsche promotes his emphasis of becoming over being.

From this perspective we can appreciate his use of crude physiological metaphors. A case in point is his repeated claim that bad cooking and inadequate nutrition are the root of much that is wrong with European man [cf. EH p.237, BGE 234]. Otherwise sympathetic critics have expressed embarrassments about these apparently crude physiological speculations. Yet such critics, besides lacking a Nietzschean sense of humor, fail to realize the polemical intent of these claims. They are not primarily intended to represent Nietzsche's sincere beliefs about the effects of food. Rather they are intended to undermine the Christian and Platonist dualistic conception of man. Where a Christian or Platonist ascribes man's ills to his possessing the wrong representations of reality, to a fault in his spiritual world, the naturalist Nietzsche locates the problem in his least spiritual organ: the stomach. Nietzsche's comments are not simply funny; they help to subvert the Platonic Christian conception of the spirit as being the prime mover in our world.

In *Ecce Homo* [p.256] Nietzsche himself offers the same justification for his insistence on the importance of physiological considerations:

One will ask me why on earth I've been relating all these small things which are generally considered matters of indifference: I only harm myself, the more so if I am destined to present great tasks. Answer: these small things - nutrition, place, climate recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness - are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far. . . . What mankind has so far considered seriously have not even been realities but mere imaginings - more strictly lies promoted by the bad instincts of sick natures that were harmful in the most profound sense - all these concepts, "God," "soul," "virtue," "sin," "beyond," "truth," "eternal life."

There is indeed much more to be said about Nietzsche's use of organic metaphors but this is not the appropriate place.¹⁴

8. Nietzsche's Truth

¹⁴ What I am alluding to here is the much discussed and deeply vexing question of Nietzsche's responsibility for the subsequent uses of his texts by his sister and yet more sinister elements. Against those who would defend Nietzsche by invoking the traditional distinction between author's intent and a work's causal effects Derrida, in his *The Ear of the Other*, has neatly pointed out that this is a distinction which Nietzsche himself held in the highest suspicion. Hence the Nietzschean slogan "a thing is the sum of its effects." Such niceties aside, I believe the real question of Nietzsche's culpability is best addressed in terms of his responsibility for fostering a set of metaphors, in particular, and most dangerously, the metaphor of degeneration. Nietzsche's complicity rests not in what he said but in his very language itself.

Above I claimed that Nietzsche uses ideas as weapons. He uses ideas not as means of describing but as tools for affecting change. As a philosopher he aims to be a legislator concerned with a world of becoming rather than a scholar cataloging a presumed world of being [cf. BGE 211, WTP 972]. This reading helps explain both his use of certain metaphors and his tendency to champion certain somewhat bizarre claims. Indeed, though I will not here argue the point, I believe that Nietzsche's doctrines of the eternal recurrence and the will to power are best interpreted, not as metaphysical postulates, but as devices aimed at combating certain received interpretations. For instance, part of the rhetorical force of the eternal recurrence is directed at Christianity with its pious rejection of this world in favor of the heavenly world to come. The eternal recurrence claims that this world is the eternal world. To minds fed on the importance of eternity and the irrelevance of earthly life what better way to emphasize the importance of earthly life than to claim that it in fact is the eternal life?¹⁵ As for the oft-mentioned weirdness of the eternal recurrence as a metaphysical postulate, it could not be that hard to swallow for minds that had already been fed a steady diet of the metaphysical preposterous, the Trinity, transubstantiation, the Virgin Birth, and the like. That Nietzsche proposes the eternal recurrence not as a new metaphysical truth, but as a device for destroying old stultifying life forms (the Christian world-view) and making way for the new is suggested by notes 417 and 462 of *The Will to Power* where he exclaims

We have to be destroyers. . . . To the paralyzing sense of general disintegration and incompleteness I opposed the eternal recurrence.

In place of "metaphysics" and religion, the theory of the eternal recurrence (this as a means of breeding and selection).

Nevertheless conceding these rhetorical motives we may return to Nietzsche's various pronouncements on truth and ask what then are we to make of them? In particular what are we to make of Nietzsche's claim that truth does not exist? What is Nietzsche's theory of truth? So far I have claimed that Nietzsche attacks the notion of truth in order to attack other related notions that he sees as "non life enhancing." Note it is not being claimed that Nietzsche sees these other notions, for instance Christian otherworldliness, as necessarily damaging to life. His is merely a historical contingent assessment. It is not universal over time, nor indeed is it even universal over all people of a given time. At the particular historical point of time where Nietzsche finds himself he sees certain notions as being life threatening for certain types of individuals. His interventions are aimed at allaying that threat. But then does he not at least regard the claim that Christian otherworldliness is life destroying for certain individuals as being true? To answer "Yes" is to ascribe to the picture of Nietzsche as being committed to the notion of truth after all. To answer "No" is to deny the interpretation we have been arguing for. At the beginning of this paper I proposed an analogy between an historians approach to the notion of witches and Nietzsche's approach to the notion of truth. It was claimed that an interest in the role witch talk plays in various cultures need not betoken interest or belief in witches, and by the same token Nietzsche's interest in the rhetoric of truth need

¹⁵ Of course Christians do see this earthly life as being important in the sense that what one does in it will determine one's position in the life to come. But this is merely an instrumental value. the Christians do not see this earthly life as intrinsically valuable in itself.

not betoken any interest in the notion of truth. We should now recognize the limits of this analogy. Clearly the historian can study the role of witch talk, giving its causes and effects, while positively disbelieving in witches. This position bears no suggestion of paradox. Yet to claim that Nietzsche is interested in the role of the rhetoric of truth while positively disbelieving in truth is to engage paradox. It would leave us with a picture of Nietzsche according to which he is making various claims about the causes and effects of that rhetoric while at the same time believing that those claims are not true. But note we have never claimed that Nietzsche disbelieves in truth only that he is not interested in the notion of truth per se. On this interpretation Nietzsche has nothing to say on the notion of truth itself. He attacks truth as a means of attacking other (contingently, that is, historically) allied notions. He attacks these other notions because of their contingent life destroying capabilities. But then why not simply circumvent all this talk of truth and directly attack the notions that are doing the damage? The problem is that of how to press such a direct attack. It would be totally ineffective for Nietzsche to attack, say Christianity or utilitarianism, by claiming that each of these has castrating effects, that it inhibits the development of individuals worthy by Nietzsche's lights. The problem of course is that the Christian, the utilitarian, are not concerned with the production of individuals that our interesting by Nietzsche's lights. If so called castration is the price one must pay to reach the world of the blessed our Christian will happily play the price. While Nietzsche objects to the very ends of Christianity and utilitarianism he realizes he cannot simply proceed by attacking those ends. So even though it is ultimately the ends he objects to, he proceeds obliquely by attacking the world views that give rise to those ends.¹⁶

9. Nietzsche as Pragmatist

In this essay I have characterized Nietzsche as somewhat of a pragmatist. This is not to say that he is advancing what has become known as a pragmatist theory of truth - truth as the useful, truth as what is good in the way of belief etc. Nietzsche is not offering any theory of truth. Nietzsche is a pragmatist in that he is concerned with ideas and perspectives as tools to various ends. He is not concerned with viewing them as would be mirrors of nature's essence.

This may tempt some to dismiss Nietzsche as a mere pragmatist: Might we not simply regard Nietzsche as a brilliant rhetorician who is indeed capable of substantially influencing individuals, but who is ultimately irrelevant to those concerned with truth? Such a response would be too hasty in ignoring Nietzsche's critique of truth. Especially since that critique is based on an assumption common to nearly all post-Kantian philosophy, namely, that our views are not the result of direct contact with an independent reality but are crucially tempered by our own subjective constitutions and interests. For naturalists, especially, Nietzsche raises important questions. Thus suppose we follow Nietzsche in seeing our various perspectives as tools for promoting various forms of life rather than as increasing accurate steps towards the objective truth. In that case must we not face Nietzsche's momentous question of deciding which kinds of life we wish to promote?¹⁷

¹⁶ This section owes much to conversations with Rüdiger Bittner.

¹⁷ Thanks are due to Rüdiger Bittner, Randall Havas, Mark Migotti, Alexander Nehamas and an anonymous referee from this journal for comments on previous drafts.

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This paragraph owes much to conversations with Mark Migotti. For more on Nietzsche's notion of becoming what you are, Cf. Alexander Nehamas's "How to become What One Is," *Philosophical Revue*, vol. 92, 1983.

Actually, this seems to have been a possibility taken rather seriously by the early Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

For instance, cf. Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 4, 87,88 and 90.

This raises the question of how Nietzsche wishes his (ideal) audience to receive his views. After all, if he sees his various claims as merely temporary steps, it would be somewhat incongruous for him to desire that his audience be wholly and permanently convinced of the truth of those claims. This question is addressed at the end of section 6. below.

One of Nietzsche's favorite, though highly implausible examples of such retardation is the case of Pascal. I say implausible because it seems to me that the very fact that Pascal took Christianity so seriously is the route of his extraordinary thought.

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985. Cf. pp.229-235. *ibid.*, chapter 1.

This is not to claim that all perspectives are equally worthy. Nietzsche is only claiming that no perspective is to be unconditionally preferred over all others.

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This section owes much to conversations with Rudiger Bittner.