

Nietzsche and God (Part II) *Adrian Samuel*

Introduction

This paper is the sequel to last issue's paper ('Nietzsche and God'). The previous paper was exegetical in its approach to Nietzsche's thought, taking his critique of God as its starting-point. This paper goes on to explore possible criticisms of Nietzsche's position, and evaluates them. It will focus upon Nietzsche's book *Beyond Good and Evil (BGE)*. It concludes that Nietzsche's naturalistic account of drives (the 'will to power') is overly simplistic but that his 'perspectivism' offers an important philosophical contribution.

Nietzsche's thought.

As argued for in the last issue, Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen as a rejection of all accounts of ultimate reality (metaphysics) due to their failure to take the hermeneutical situation seriously (i.e., the interpretative situation within which we judge). That is, any account of objective reality (i.e., what the world is really like) that fails to recognise its dependency upon subjective interpretation is reflectively naïve. For Nietzsche believes that any attempt to understand the world in terms of a mind-independent reality ('objectivity') implicitly interprets reality in terms of its *contrast* with the mind ('subjectivity'). And this subject-object contrast leads to acts of interpretation (along with their questions of meaning and of evaluation) being seen as not properly real – they are restricted to acts of the mind (subjectivity) in contrast to the matter of objectivity. Questions of meaning then, are only instrumental for identifying reality. Similarly, our determinations about what counts as real are seen to merely belong to the 'mind', suggesting that our values are also not properly real. That is, questions of evaluation are also only instrumental for identifying reality. Now if this is true, a commitment to a mind-independent reality is not interpretatively neutral – it rather involves a preconception about reality, understood as being stuff that is essentially meaningless and evaluatively neutral ('matter').

Nietzsche identifies the concern for objectivity as the 'prejudice' of the philosopher (first chapter of *BGE*). In other words, philosophers are so concerned with getting the 'truth' of reality (as opposed to the 'false') or identifying the 'good' (as opposed to the 'evil') that they fail to reflect upon the significance of such a conceptual approach to reality (i.e., whether these conceptual oppositions involve an adequate approach to understanding reality). In the Preface to *BGE*, Nietzsche compares such a philosophical approach to the grasping advances of a naïve lover, simply intent on possessing the object of its affection without an ability to subtly respond.

Nietzsche's challenge to traditional philosophy is therefore radical – putting the basic concepts of the philosophical project (the pursuit of truth in contrast to the false and the determination of the good in contrast to the evil) radically into question.

Truth and perspectivism in Nietzsche.

Against Nietzsche's putting the concepts of 'truth' or 'goodness' into question, and his presenting a commitment to them as merely a 'prejudice' on the part of philosophers, it might be argued that Nietzsche is guilty of undermining the very possibility of the philosophical project. That is, his attempt to philosophically question a commitment to truth is self-undermining, since philosophy necessarily involves an exploration of what is true rather than false. To use an analogy, it would be like claiming that movement is merely a prejudice of the discipline of dance. But movement is a necessary feature of dance – not merely a 'prejudice'. Similarly, distinguishing between the true and the false is a necessary feature of philosophy, not simply a prejudice.

This criticism seems to misunderstand Nietzsche's position. For Nietzsche is not simply rejecting truth outright – he is not simply saying that we should do away with truth. He is claiming that we need to rethink our concept of truth. Indeed, he explicitly argues for a new model of philosophy with a different understanding of truth – what he sees to be a characteristic of the 'approaching philosophers' who are 'new friends of "truth"' (*BGE*, 43). Furthermore, Nietzsche rejects the 'cynic' position of rejecting truth (*BGE*, 26) due to its involving a performative contradiction.¹ That is, the cynic argues that there is no truth, but has to do this 'in front of witnesses' so that others paradoxically acknowledge the absence of truth to be true. Or in other words, the substance of the cynic claim (that there is no truth) is contradicted by performance of the cynic's claiming this to be true.

To understand how Nietzsche avoids a self-refuting relativism (i.e., the claim that it is true that there is no truth), it is helpful to turn to section 10 of *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche directly criticises the relativist position. For in this section, Nietzsche explicitly rejects those puritanical fanatics of intellectual conscience who 'would rather lay down their lives for a certain Nothing than for an uncertain something'. That is, Nietzsche is arguing that relativists would rather give up on truth altogether so as to know for certain that there is nothing to know. And this allows us to understand Nietzsche's critique of relativism. For he presents a commitment to certainty as fundamental to the relativists' understanding of truth – the one thing that we can be certain of is that we can know nothing with certainty. Against this identifying the criterion of truth with certainty, Nietzsche champions a more subtle understanding of truth's acknowledgement. For in the same section, he writes: 'stronger, more vital thinkers' [i.e., those who do not need to appeal to such absolute standards of truth] are able to adopt a 'perspectivist' approach to truth, delighting in the exploration of uncertainty.

To appreciate Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism, it is important to distinguish between the epistemic (how reality is acknowledged) and the ontological (the reality that is acknowledged). Perspectivism affirms epistemic relativism (i.e., there is no unique reality to be known). For example, if there is a table in the room we might all see it differently. I might just see its surface due to sitting on top of it. You might see its four legs and its long edge due to sitting just before the table. And someone else

¹ A performative contradiction is one in which the content of the claim contradicts how the claim is made – e.g., my claiming that 'I am not speaking'.

might see its short edge and only two legs due to sitting on one side of the table. Now we are not able to claim that one way of seeing the table is correct – they are all different ways of properly seeing the table (epistemic relativism). Nevertheless, we would no doubt agree that there is a real table to be seen (ontological realism), and this rules out certain claims (e.g., the table is made of jelly) as wrong.

Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' is not therefore simply rejecting truth (full relativism). It acknowledges ontological realism (i.e., there is a reality to be known), but at the same time affirms epistemic relativism (i.e., that any acknowledgement of reality is necessarily from a particular perspective or viewpoint, and this shapes how reality is acknowledged). Nietzsche's critique of the 'prejudice' of philosophers is therefore the assumption that there is *one* way to acknowledge reality, not that there is a reality to be known.

Against Nietzsche however, it might be argued that the analogy of the table viewed from different angles is a misleading one when applied to the discipline of philosophy. For in cases of perceiving tables, philosophers would typically agree both with the ontologically real claim that there is a table to be seen and with the epistemically relativist claim that there are different ways of seeing that table. Nevertheless, it is arguably mistaken to claim that such instances of perception are sufficiently similar to the discipline of philosophy. For in contrast to a particular viewpoint on something, philosophy attempts to present us with the essential nature of reality (traditionally termed its 'substance'). That is, philosophy is focused on the essential nature of ontological reality rather than on specific epistemic conditions. Indeed, philosophy traditionally brackets out such questions of epistemic relativity so as to give as clear account of the ontological reality as possible. Or in other words, the philosopher is similar to the scientist (traditionally termed the 'natural philosopher'), who brackets out or sets aside everything specific to their perception (i.e., the epistemically relative) so as to record information of that which is experimentally re-testable (i.e., the ontologically real).

The reason why Nietzsche is against the reduction of epistemic relativism to its merely being instrumental for identifying ontological reality (an approach characteristic of the natural sciences and traditional 'analytic philosophy') is because of his understanding of perception. This is because perception for Nietzsche is necessarily meaningful – a meaningless perception is not a perception at all. To understand why this is so, imagine a series of colours going through one's mind. Each one is insignificant to you, not identified as one thing rather than another. Now if this was the case, it would strictly be wrong to claim that you have perceived anything. You have undergone certain experiences, but they are not to be dignified by being termed perceptions. To perceive something, it properly has to be identified *as* something.

Perception therefore, necessarily assumes identification, and identification necessarily assumes a framework of meaning (so as to make the necessary distinctions, contrasts, etc. assumed by identification). For questions of meaning are necessarily holistic, involving distinctions within an integrated understanding. Or in other words, what a specific thing means is shaped by the network of relations within which it is understood. For example, what we mean by tall is determined by its contrast with being short. Furthermore, a concept's meaning tends to be shaped by its context – i.e.,

a tall person and a tall building have very different heights, determined by what we expect the height of a person and a building to be. Now if this is the case, we can both allow that we properly encounter reality (ontological realism) while at the same time recognising that what we mean by things is always shaped by a particular framework of understanding (epistemic relativism).

Nietzsche's commitment to epistemic relativism might therefore be compared to Berkeley's idealism. For Berkeley rejected Locke's attempt to go beyond our perceptions to a mind-independent reality due to his belief that we can only acknowledge what we perceive. Berkeley concludes that 'to be is to be perceived'. Nietzsche similarly argues that any attempt to go beyond what we mean by things to a neutral, underlying ontological reality is to end in a position of meaninglessness, since we can only meaningfully discuss what is meaningful to us.² Therefore he concludes that all knowledge is perspectival (shaped by what meaning it has for us).

It might then, be thought that Nietzsche's position suffers from a criticism traditionally levelled at Berkeley. That is, Berkeley arguably confuses the claim that because perception is necessary for acknowledging reality therefore the possibility of perception is necessary for things to be real. Or in other words, just because perception is *how* we acknowledge reality, it does not follow that reality is nothing more than the act of acknowledgement (i.e., 'to be is to be perceived'). Nietzsche's account of the necessity of meaning for acknowledging reality might similarly be thought to confuse the fact that because frameworks of meaning are necessary for acknowledging reality, such frameworks are necessary for the possibility of things being real. But closer consideration of this shows it to be false. Nietzsche allows for ontological realism, while *also* affirming epistemic relativism. Or in other words, Nietzsche is not reducing the ontological to the epistemic (as Berkeley arguably does). Nietzsche is rather claiming that the two have to be held in tension together.

Nietzsche and realism

Against Nietzsche however, it might still be argued that his 'perspectivism' or epistemic relativism ultimately collapses into an ontologically relativist position in spite of itself. This is because if everything that we can meaningfully claim is always determined by a framework of meaning, how can we meaningfully discuss anything beyond our own viewpoint? Or to use Nietzsche's own language, if everything we understand is bounded by our own 'horizon' (*BGE*, 44) of meaning, how can we see beyond that horizon to acknowledge reality itself (i.e., the ontologically real). It seems that we cannot, and if we cannot access the ontologically real, we necessarily collapse into full relativism. And if this is the case, as with full relativism, Nietzsche's philosophy undermines the criteria of acknowledging reality, and so is self-refuting in its attempt to illuminate reality to us.

To appreciate Nietzsche's attempt to overcome this problem, we need distinguish his attempt from Kant's. Kant's solution to this problem is to claim that rational reflection allows us to transcend our different ways of conceiving the world so as to recognise the necessary preconditions of perception and of understanding themselves. That is,

² Due to his belief that Locke's understanding of a mind-independent reality of primary qualities transcended what could be meaningfully discussed.

even if we cannot know reality as it is properly 'in-itself' (what Kant terms the 'transcendentally real') we can know reality as it reveals itself to perception and understanding (what Kant terms the 'transcendentally ideal'). Or in other words, we are capable of knowing the way reality necessarily discloses itself to perception and understanding, even if we cannot know reality outside our faculties of perception and understanding.

To use Kant's own language then, we can bridge the divide between the epistemic and the ontological through appealing to the 'synthetic *a priori*' conditions of perception and understanding. 'Synthetic' here means that the conditions are grounded neither on the object nor the subject of perception, but rather in their 'synthesis' of (relation between) the two in the act of perceiving. '*A priori*' means that these conditions are seen not to depend upon instances of experience – they rather hold as necessary preconditions of experience as such. Kant therefore concludes that we can properly know the ontologically real, even if it is always mediated by our faculties of perception (the epistemic), since it holds as a necessary precondition of cognition as such.

Kant's solution of the 'synthetic *a priori*' faculties of knowledge however, assumes that there are stable preconditions for the activities of perception and understanding. (*BGE*, 11) Nietzsche is concerned to make possible new ways of perceiving reality, rather than to attempt to restrict our perceptions to conditions that presently hold. As such, he rejects the 'synthetic *a priori*' as a basis of knowledge. (*BGE*, 54)

Having rejected the Kantian solution however, how does Nietzsche avoid the problem of collapsing into ontological relativism, and so the impossibility of illuminating an understanding of reality? Nietzsche's solution is similar to Kant's, but rather than appealing to necessary preconditions that are fixed, Nietzsche appeals to an interplay of drives – what he terms his '*evolutionary theory of the will to power*' (*BGE*, 23). That is, out of the interplay of drives, all reality is understood to have evolved.

Such an approach leads Nietzsche to try to undercut any account of reality so as to explore the drives that led up to the necessity of such an account. Or as Nietzsche puts it in section one of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he becomes less interested in the question of 'what' truth is, and more interested in 'why do we not prefer untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?' Nietzsche then, attempts to explore the question 'what truth is' in terms of the questions 'why' do we want this 'truth', 'whose' truth is it, what is the '*value* of this will' to truth. He compares his project to Oedipus before the sphinx, except it is not clear which is Oedipus and which is sphinx – i.e., is the truth the standard of his 'will' (his act of deciding) or is his 'will' the standard of truth?

The advantage of Nietzsche's move of exploring the relation between truth and the will is that it allows him to undercut the divide between the epistemic (subjective consciousness) and the ontological (objective reality). This is because both are simply different aspects of the underlying constructive process of drives which is the '*evolutionary theory of the will to power*'.

Against Nietzsche however, it could be argued that it is not clear how this process occurs. Certainly, he presents the will to power as a naturalistic process of drives that evolve into conscious drives, but it is not clear how this is achieved.³

Nietzsche and reduction

Furthermore, Nietzsche's position leads to his reducing all the answers that our thought arrives at to mere 'constructs' of a 'psychological' process. (*BGE*, 23) That is, the truth of science, mathematics, etc. are seen as merely constructs resultant upon drives, whose reality therefore boils down to their effectiveness in the interplay of drives. That is, all truths are essentially seen as significant only insofar as they contribute to the constructive process of the will to power (as product, as stimulus or as both). This is certainly counter-intuitive to what we mean by truth.

Nietzsche however, acknowledges this and embraces it, emphasising the creativity that such a model of thought makes possible (in contrast to the conservatism of merely attempting to conform our thought to the facts). He even acknowledges this about his own thought. For in section 296 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he emphasises the constructive process out of which his work evolved (the 'sudden sparks and miracles of my solitude, my old, beloved – wicked thoughts'), comparing this favourably to the rigidity of the book that we have before us (as 'written and depicted thoughts' 'You've already cast off your novelty and some of you, I fear, are at the point of becoming truths: they already look so immortal, so heart breakingly righteous, so boring!').

Nevertheless, even if Nietzsche recognises the implications of his position, it does not mean that his position is right. Nietzsche's thought can be criticised on moral grounds, since his attempt to reduce all truth claims to naturalistic drives means that moral claims are themselves without truth. Indeed, Nietzsche fully embraces the logical consequences of his position, critiquing all moral claims in terms of the realisation of the constructivist process of drives. Those that hinder that process – i.e., those that inhibit greatness due to their demanding compassion and other activities that don't contribute to the constructivist process – are treated with disdain. Indeed, any claim to an epistemically realist position is characterised as 'slavish' and 'ignoble', unable to creatively immerse itself in the constructivist process of the will to power. Such a failure to acknowledge moral responsibility to the weak, etc., might be seen as a failure in Nietzsche's thought.⁴

Nietzsche however, could respond that it is sentimental to cling on to values of compassion because they currently seem beautiful. Furthermore, Nietzsche provides us with an account of how compassion came to be so highly esteemed, arguing that prior to Christianity it was not. That is, the moral concern for the weak is presented as

³ Klossowski's *Nietzsche and the eternal return* and Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* have gone some way to describing such a model of constructivism, but it remains very abstract.

⁴ Heidegger, approaching Nietzsche's thought in terms of the 'question of being' (i.e., how being is disclosed through our thought), argues that Nietzsche's position is devastating for thought's openness to being, since it implicitly claims that there is essentially nothing to acknowledge. That is, acknowledgement is essentially a process of construction for Nietzsche, meaning that we have no essential need to acknowledge being as being, leaving it as mere material for human ('technological') exploitation. This is a forceful criticism of Nietzsche's thought.

a historical construct, shaped by Judaeo-Christian forms of authority that have influenced culture over time. For compassion is seen to have resulted from the 'slave revolt in morals', characteristic of Judaism (*BGE*, 195), since such a slavish people were concerned to defend their rights against the 'master' or oppressor (appealing to a super-master termed 'God' to do this). As such, justice came to be understood in terms of rights, and responsibility came to be understood in terms of a passive acknowledgement of these rights. Christianity is then presented as merely radicalising such an approach, replacing the Old Testament demand to 'set my people free' with the New Testament demand of complete compassion (of sacrificing oneself for the demands of love) so as to witness to a world in which all rights are respected. (*BGE*, 55)

Nietzsche unfavourably contrasts such a 'slave morality' with a 'master morality', which understands justice in terms of giving everything its due based upon the respect it commands. And responsibility on such a model is understood aspirationally, as bringing reality within the master's sphere of decision-making. (*BGE*, 260)

Against Nietzsche, it might be argued that 'the weak should be defended' is a 'basic belief' – i.e., one that does not need justification. That is, such demands of conscience are 'primordial' or 'primitive' – essential demands involved in being human, and not to be explained away through a metaphysics of 'drives'. Or similarly, it might be argued that Nietzsche's 'natural history' of religion is mistaken – that the Judaeo-Christian tradition was not simply a 'sublime deformity' (*BGE*, 62), undermining the constructivist process of 'life'. Rather, it tapped into questions of ultimate authority and brought these to light through the history recorded in the Bible. Nietzsche is therefore arguably wrong to reduce questions of authority (the subject of religious narrative) to naturalistic explanations (and his particular understanding of these in terms of drives).

Nietzsche however, is not simply content to oppose himself to morality and religion – he also attacks socialist politics, presenting it as the intellectually bankrupt heir of the death of God. That is, it holds on to the values of the Christian message of defending the weak, while giving up on the very architecture of thought (i.e., Christianity) which could justify such values. (*BGE*, 202)

Against Nietzsche, it might be argued that socialism does not depend upon the Christian message. The philosopher and economist Marx, for example, would claim that his socialist vision is rigorously materialist, exposing the ideological frameworks or 'superstructures' that entrap people, so as to facilitate an economic framework that is best suited to the material forces of production. Indeed, Marx explicitly disowns any indebtedness to religious traditions, since these are of course, part of the ideological superstructure.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's philosophy offers us a rigorously thought through naturalism, understanding all aspects of reality (the findings of the natural sciences, the claims of morality and religion, etc.) in terms of the interplay of drives. Furthermore, Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' successfully avoids reducing perception (the epistemic) to its being merely a tool for identifying reality (the ontological), and so holds on to the

integrity of perception. Furthermore, it avoids the problems of an ontologically relativist position, and so arguably escapes the charge of being self-undermining.

The main weakness in Nietzsche's thought lies in its failure to provide any detailed account of how his constructivist model works in reality. Nietzsche uses it more to criticise other ways of thinking (principally realist models in science, ethics and religion) rather than clearly presenting it on its own terms. Furthermore, and tied to the previous point, Nietzsche's attempt to reduce all other criteria of thought to his own model (i.e., the free outworking of the will to power) is arguably simplistic. It seems that the fields of ethical, religious and political inquiry, for example, cannot simply be reduced to a naturalistic account of constructivist drives without undermining the distinctiveness of these disciplines. And if this is the case, it puts Nietzsche's whole metaphysics of the will to power into question. That is, we paradoxically have to defend Nietzsche's own insights into perspectivism (the distinctiveness of the epistemic) against his attempt to reduce these to a realist ontology (understood in terms of drives). And this arguably shows that it is Nietzsche's perspectivism which is his most significant philosophical contribution.

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