

## NIETZSCHE ON THE POSSIBILITY OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

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### Abstract

This paper examines Nietzsche's views on truth and knowledge in the context of both his rejection of the Kantian thing-in-itself and his perspectivism. It is argued that Nietzsche's principal contention with the thing-in-itself centers round the dissociation of truth and justification. The paper argues that Nietzsche's perspectivism, understood as an epistemic thesis, sows the seeds for the overcoming of this sceptical dissociation.

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### **Introduction**

Nietzsche's thoughts on the issues of truth and knowledge permeate his entire philosophical corpus and have proven to be the most disputed in the Nietzsche canon. This is arguably because Nietzsche often refers to these issues in some wider context, as they direct his views on other, less obviously epistemological, issues. One often finds, for example, that Nietzsche refers to or even presupposes various epistemological commitments in his discussions of value. Thus it is arguably the case that Nietzsche's primary philosophical concerns are not epistemological in character. However, it seems to me that particular epistemological commitments inform much of what Nietzsche has to say on other issues. This is suggested, for example, when he writes of the "self-overcoming of morality through truthfulness" (Nietzsche, 1992, "Why I am a Destiny", 3) and when he states that "the importance of knowledge for life *ought* to appear as great as possible" (Nietzsche, 1994, 6). Any interpretation of Nietzsche's ideas on the issues of truth and knowledge requires, then, a degree of excavation. Karl Jaspers'

comparison of Nietzsche's writings to a destroyed building that must be reconstructed from the hints and clues provided by its ruins is particularly apt here (Jaspers, 1993, pp.3-4). For it draws our attention to both the role of the interpreter of Nietzsche's writings and the need to reconstruct Nietzsche's arguments.<sup>1</sup> It is on the basis of this type of understanding of Nietzsche's project and one's interpretive engagement with it that I shall propose that a non-sceptical position informs Nietzsche's writings.<sup>2</sup> However, any attempt to do this is compounded by Nietzsche's use of the language of falsification to describe the status of our beliefs. This difficulty is not helped by the fact that sometimes Nietzsche combines statements regarding the erroneous nature of our beliefs with more straightforward truth claims. For example, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 229 he claims to reveal truths that have remained hidden for centuries whilst declaring all our beliefs to be false. This, however, would suggest that Nietzsche thought that his use of the language of falsification is compatible with his more positive philosophical claims. Moreover, in many of the passages where Nietzsche describes what falsification entails, he does so in terms of simplification.<sup>3</sup> This further suggests that when Nietzsche articulates the falsification thesis it is not global error that he has predominantly in mind, but rather "narrow" perspectives as opposed to more "comprehensive" perspectives. Throughout the paper, I shall suggest that Nietzsche's anti-sceptical argument emerges and takes shape in the context of both Nietzsche's rejection of the intelligibility of the thing-in-itself and his perspectivism as a response to what he sees as the dissociation of truth and justification in the history of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> I shall use the term "metaphysical realism"<sup>5</sup> to capture this dissociation because, for Nietzsche, as we shall see, the

dissociation of truth and justification has been intertwined with a particular dualist form of metaphysics throughout its history.

### **Metaphysical Realism and the Problem of the Thing-In-Itself**

Nietzsche contends that philosophy has hitherto operated within a dualistic appearance/reality dichotomy where reality is deemed to be an *extra-empirical* realm of truth whilst the actual empirical world of our ordinary experience is deemed to be a realm of deception and untruth.<sup>6</sup> It is thus Nietzsche's contention that philosophy has operated within a metaphysical realist paradigm. I employ the term metaphysical realism here to denote the view that reality has a determinate nature, which is cognitively inaccessible to our natural means of knowing about the world. Of particular interest to Nietzsche is its claim that reality is epistemically divorced from human cognitive subjects. He writes:

[---] stricter logicians, after they had rigorously established the concept of the metaphysical as the concept of that which is unconditioned and consequently unconditioning, denied any connection between the unconditioned (the metaphysical world) and the world we are familiar with. *So that the thing-in-itself does not appear in the world of appearances*, [my italics], and any conclusion about the former on the basis of the latter must be rejected. (Nietzsche, 1994, 16)

As such, the metaphysical realist implies that even our in principle best-justified beliefs may be radically false. They may be false in the sense that they fail to mirror reality as it is independently of our cognitive constitution. According to Nietzsche, this metaphysical realist desire to mirror reality as it is in itself requires a conception of the cognitive subject as one unhindered by particular cognitive

interests. Metaphysical realism thus adopts a God's Eye View or supra-perspectival standard of both truth and reality. Nietzsche's disagreement with the metaphysical realist involves, in a similar fashion to Michael Williams, not "our trying to 'understand objective knowledge' but rather our trying to 'understand knowledge objectively,' i.e. from the 'detached,' philosophical perspective." (Williams, 1991, p. 254)<sup>7</sup> Thus Nietzsche's disagreement centres round the epistemological thesis contained in metaphysical realism. This epistemological thesis maintains that our knowledge is only adequate to reality if that knowledge is extra-perspectival and therefore non-anthropocentric in character. This epistemic thesis is articulated in metaphysical realism in two ways. For metaphysical realists can, in Nietzsche's view, be divided into two groups. We can characterize them as either cognitivists or non-cognitivists with regard to the knowability of the metaphysical "real" world. The cognitivist claims that reality is both accessible and knowable through a special faculty that allows direct and unmediated knowledge of ultimate reality. However, metaphysical realists of the non-cognitivist persuasion argue that reality as it is in itself is inaccessible. Rationalist metaphysicians represent the former. The latter view arrives on the philosophical scene, according to Nietzsche, in the guise of Kant. This non-cognitivist form of metaphysical realism emerges following the demise of the cognitivist version. Thus in order to better understand Nietzsche's critique I shall adumbrate both versions in turn.

Nietzsche argues that the aforementioned metaphysical realist practice of devaluing the empirical world has its roots in the rationalist appeal to *a priori*

Reason as the source of knowledge of the “real” world. By this I mean that it is Nietzsche’s view that rationalist metaphysics claim to have unmediated conceptual access to an extra-empirical realm of reality as it is in itself. Its concepts are presented as something innate and certain as opposed to Nietzsche’s view that they have evolved over a period of time:

Hitherto one has generally trusted one’s concepts as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland: but they are, after all, the inheritance from our most remote, most foolish as well as most intelligent ancestors. (Nietzsche, 1968, 409)

Thus, of the *cognitivist* metaphysical realist model, Nietzsche claims that “Reality is nowhere to be found in them, not even as a problem.” (Nietzsche, 1998c, III.3) He argues that this particular interpretation of the world is “fabricated solely from psychological needs” (Nietzsche, 1968, 12A) and that once this has been revealed through genealogical and historical inquiry, the dissolution of this metaphysical picture will be inevitable. (Nietzsche, 1994, 1) Genealogy inquires into the contingent origins of a belief whilst historical inquiry traces the development of the belief. Nietzsche claims that once the psychological and moral ulterior guiding motives behind the invention of the metaphysical dualism are revealed, this dualism will be refuted:

*Metaphysical world.* It is true, there might be a metaphysical world; one can hardly dispute the absolute possibility of it. We see all things by means of our human head, and cannot chop it off, though it remains to wonder what would be left of the world if indeed it had been cut off. This is a purely scientific problem, and not very suited to cause men worry. But all that has produced metaphysical assumptions and

made them *valuable, horrible, pleasurable* to men thus far is passion, error, and self-deception. The very worst methods of knowledge, not the very best, have taught us to believe in them. *When one has disclosed these methods to be the foundation of all existing religions and metaphysical systems, one has refuted them.* [my italics] (Nietzsche, 1994, 9)

Metaphysical realism, in its cognitivist guise, becomes an untenable philosophical position, according to Nietzsche, once the *will to truth* undermines itself. It does this in the sense that it can no longer endorse the belief in the “true” world once genealogical and historical inquiry reveal its origins. Nietzsche writes:

But among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective - and now the recognition of this inveterate mendaciousness that one despairs of shedding becomes a stimulant. Now we discover in ourselves needs implanted by centuries of moral interpretation - needs that now appear to us as needs for untruth; on the other hand, the value for which we endure life seems to hinge on these needs. This antagonism - *not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves - results in a process of dissolution. (Nietzsche, 1968, 5)

Peter Poellner (2001) appeals to *Human, All Too Human*, to support what he calls Nietzsche’s metaphysical indifferentist argument against the thing-in-itself. This argument entails, according to Poellner, that it is possible that there is a metaphysical world, but that this theoretical possibility bears no practical consequences for us. However, Nietzsche’s reference to the metaphysical world in *Human, All Too Human*, 9, it seems to me, is highly ambiguous. On one level it appears to refer to a theoretical possibility that bears no practical implications. On a second level, however, Nietzsche adopts a stronger position that rejects, in his

view, the possibility of a metaphysical world. He contends that this possibility has been “refuted” by showing that the methodology informing it is unreliable. Moreover, he contends in *Human, All Too Human*, 16 that the metaphysical world is only capable of a negative definition that is lacking in meaning. The addition of this second level renders Nietzsche’s argument here stronger than the indifferentist interpretation. The stronger argument implies that there cannot be a thing-in-itself whose nature is radically different from the world that we are familiar with and thus capable of casting our beliefs into radical doubt. Either way, however, Nietzsche suggests that the very idea of the thing-in-itself is epistemically impotent.

The collapse of the cognitivist version of metaphysical realism indicates, in Nietzsche’s view, the untenability of the extra-perspectival conception of knowing inherent in the God’s Eye View of knowledge. Although this is an important aspect of his complete rejection of metaphysical realism, Nietzsche argues that the revelation that Reason is not an objective and disinterested cognitive tool that facilitates access to the world as it is in itself does not result in the complete collapse of metaphysical realism. Rather, metaphysical realism merely adopts a non-cognitivist stance with regard to the “real” world. In his outline of the history of philosophy in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche traces the progressive demise of the rationalist conception of reality and our knowledge of it. I will cite this passage for the convenience of the reader.

## HOW THE 'REAL WORLD' FINALLY BECAME A FABLE

## History of an Error

1. The real world attainable for the wise man, the pious man, the virtuous man – he lives in it, *he is it*.  
(Most ancient form of the idea, relatively clever, simple, convincing. Paraphrase of the proposition: 'I, Plato, *am* the truth')
2. The real world unattainable for now, but promised to the wise man, the pious man, the virtuous man ('to the sinner who repents').  
(Progress of the idea: it becomes more cunning, more insidious, more incomprehensible – *it becomes a woman*, it becomes Christian---)
3. The real world unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable, but the mere thought of it a consolation, an obligation, an imperative.  
(The old sun in the background, but seen through mist and scepticism; the idea become sublime, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.)
4. The real world – unattainable? At any rate unattained. And since unattained also *unknown*. Hence no consolation, redemption, obligation either: what could something unknown oblige us to do?---  
(Break of day. First yawn of reason. Cock-crow of positivism.)
5. The 'real world' – an idea with no further use, no longer even an obligation – an idea become useless, superfluous, *therefore* a refuted idea: let us do away with it!  
(Broad daylight; breakfast; return of *bons sens* and cheerfulness; Plato's shameful blush; din from all free spirits.)
6. The real world – we have done away with it: what world was left? the apparent one, perhaps?---But no! *with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!*  
(Noon; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; pinnacle of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.) (Nietzsche, 1998c, IV)

Nietzsche's complaint here centres round his belief that philosophy has operated within a *dualistic, two-world* model. According to this model, our knowledge can only be adequate to reality if we disengage ourselves from our particular anthropocentric interests. Stages one to four in Nietzsche's history of philosophy represent this two-world mode of thinking that has its origins in Platonism and Christianity. It is significant for our purposes that Nietzsche places Kant at stage three, thus indicating that he considers that Kant too operates within this two-world mode of thinking. According to Nietzsche, Kant retains the rationalist faith in metaphysical realism in the guise of the inaccessible and unknowable thing-in-itself. In so doing, Kant adopts, in Nietzsche's view, the non-cognitivist strain of



metaphysical realism. Nietzsche argues that Kant belongs to this metaphysical realist category because he retains the thing-in-itself as a metaphysical hangover from rationalist metaphysics.<sup>8</sup> This hangover results, in Nietzsche's view, from Kant's acceptance of the demise of unmediated conceptual knowledge coupled with his retention of the idea that our human cognitive machinery is unable to provide insight into the ultimate nature of reality.

In the final stage of his outline of the history of the "true" world Nietzsche indicates, by naming his mythic mouthpiece Zarathustra, that his own philosophy will take upon itself the task of undermining this two-world approach. Since Nietzsche thinks that the cognitivist version has suffered a death by its own hands it remains for him to overcome the non-cognitivist version of metaphysical realism. I shall begin to examine the manner in which Nietzsche succeeds in doing this in the next two sections. It will be seen that Nietzsche's main contention with metaphysical realism centres round the issue of the *justification* of our epistemic claims. Truth and justification comprise, for the metaphysical realist, a correspondence between the way the world is in itself and our epistemic and normative assertions. With the demise of the cognitivist version, however, and its metamorphosis into the non-cognitivist version, we witness what may be termed a decoupling<sup>9</sup> of truth and justification, whereby our ordinary experience of the world and the justification of our epistemic claims are denied the title "truth". Thus according to this version, truth-in-itself and our actual practices of justification are radically divorced. In such a case we witness what Nietzsche terms a severing of theory from practice. In theory, the non-cognitivist

metaphysical realist adopts a foundationalist approach to the question of truth and justification. However, in practice, given the cognitive inaccessibility of truth-in-itself, the non-cognitive metaphysical realist operates with possible falsehoods and illusions. Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical realism aims to overcome this underlying foundationalist approach. If he is to succeed in this he must overcome the non-cognitivist version of metaphysical realism by recoupling truth and justification. He does this, as we shall see, by both demonstrating the incoherence of the idea of the thing-in-itself and by adopting a contextualist, anti-foundationalist conception of justification. Contrary to the non-cognitivist metaphysical realist idea of inaccessible "truth-in-itself" and the consequent dissociation of truth and justification that this entails, Nietzsche claims that our practices of justification determine truth. With this in mind I shall proceed by turning to Nietzsche's *perspectivism*.

### **Nietzsche and *Perspectivism***

Understood as a form of anti-foundationalist thought, Nietzsche's *perspectivism* is designed to counteract the metaphysical realist correspondence theory of truth and justification. In so doing, Nietzsche aims to replace the metaphysical realist view *from nowhere* with the perspectivist view *from somewhere*. He defines a perspective as an "interest of certain types of life" (Nietzsche, 1968, 293) arguing that our truths are irretrievably entwined with our interests. *Perspectivism* aims to induce, contrary to the metaphysical realist, a form of epistemological modesty by claiming that we cannot acquire extra-perspectival knowledge. Extra-perspectival *knowledge* is conceivable, according to Nietzsche, only if we permit both the

objectionable concept of the thing-in-itself or Platonic eternal verities and the necessary rationalist cognitive tools. However, Nietzsche contends that his genealogical argument has shown that what has been considered to be extra-perspectival knowledge has actually been only a perspective.<sup>10</sup> He further supplements this empirical argument with an *a priori* one that suggests that the very idea of a view from nowhere is contradictory.

For let us guard ourselves better from now on, gentlemen philosophers, against the dangerous old conceptual fabrication that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge”; let us guard ourselves against the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: here it is always demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction, in which the active and interpretive forces through which seeing first becomes seeing-something are to be shut off, are to be absent; thus, what is demanded here is always an absurdity and non-concept of an eye. (Nietzsche, 1998b, III:12)

Since the God’s Eye View and the thing-in-itself are mutually dependent on one another, according to Nietzsche, the demise of one must lead to the inevitable collapse of the other. For Nietzsche argues that the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is only made intelligible by the conceivability of a God’s Eye View. The inconceivability of such a view, Nietzsche contends, removes the basis of scepticism founded on this distinction. He thus claims that the concept of the thing-in-itself or a metaphysical world that is inaccessible to our cognitive faculties is also a contradiction in terms. Nietzsche argues that it is impossible to conceptualize such a notion. He writes:

But I shall repeat a hundred times over that the ‘immediate certainty’, like ‘absolute knowledge’ and the ‘thing in itself’, contains a *contradictio in adjecto*: it’s time people freed themselves from the seduction of words! (Nietzsche, 1998a, 16)

Nietzsche contends that the thing-in-itself is an idea “empty of meaning” (Nietzsche, 1994, 16) that can only be defined negatively. (Ibid.) Any attempt to conceptualize what is perforce for Nietzsche unconceptualizable is a fruitless activity to the extent that, he argues, “We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be [---].” (Nietzsche, 1974, 374) `

With his argument regarding the unintelligibility of both the God’s Eye View and the thing-in-itself, Nietzsche introduces the criteria for his anti-metaphysical realism. The reach of our perspectives becomes the boundary of both intelligibility and rational acceptability. Thus *perspectivism* narrows the issue of truth to truth “for us” as opposed to, what he considers to be, the implausible metaphysical realist notion of truth-in-itself. In so doing, Nietzsche denies contrary to the metaphysical realist, that reality is epistemically inaccessible to our cognitive constitution.

Maudemarie Clark captures Nietzsche’s thinking in this respect when she defines metaphysical realism as the view that truth is independent of both our cognitive capacities and cognitive interests. (Clark, 1990, p.48) Our cognitive capacities are subject to development and change. It is thus conceivable that there are cognitive

subjects with greater cognitive abilities than us to the extent that they have enhanced observational capacities. Our cognitive interests, on the other hand, may be construed as that which “we could ever want” (Clark, 1990, p. 98) from a theory. Clark claims that our standards of rational acceptability express the cognitively relevant properties that we want from a theory. Thus our cognitive interests can be defined as that which is cognitively useful to us. (Clark, 1990, p. 98)<sup>11</sup> Such interests include, for example, explanatory success and the simplicity of a theory. Clark articulates the metaphysical realist view in the following way:

Truth is independent not simply of what we now want, but of what we could ever want, that is, of what we would want even under ideal conditions for inquiry for beings like ourselves. (Clark, 1990, p. 48)

This view leaves open the possibility that our beliefs may be massively in error in a similar manner to Descartes’ subject deceived by the demon or the brain in a vat that is deceived by the master scientist. Given this possibility, the metaphysical realist thinks it intelligible that our beliefs about the world may be illusory, bearing no significant cognitive relation to how the world is in itself. Such a view considers truth to be independent of both our cognitive capacities and interests. The situation depicted in the demon scenario transcends our capacities in the sense that it is beyond our sensory detective abilities alone to discern whether the beliefs induced in us by the demon are adequate to the true nature of reality. It is independent of our interests to the extent that it implies that, without a divine guarantee, a theory that gave us all we could ever want from a theory might nevertheless be massively in error.

Thus truth is independent of our cognitive interests if it is claimed that our cognitive engagement with the world may be radically false. In order to close the possibility of massive error, anti-metaphysical realism, in contrast, must maintain that truth is dependent on our cognitive interests but independent of our cognitive capacities. It must be independent of our cognitive capacities in order to allow for the real possibility of increased observational abilities and discovery etc. However, it must be dependent upon our cognitive interests in order to rule out the possibility of casting our beliefs into massive error. Thus anti-metaphysical realist truth is dependent on what we could ever want from a theory understood as that which is intelligible to cognitive subjects with our mode of rationality. This entails that a proposition or theory, which is supported by the best reasons we in principle could have for holding that particular view, cannot be radically in error. This is suggested by Nietzsche's association of our best reasons (our consideration of multiple perspectives and the balancing of reasons for and against a view) with the quest for certainty:

[---] *the great majority of people* does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves *an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con* [my italics], and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward: [---] But what is goodheartedness, refinement or genius to me, when the person who has these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his faith and judgments and when he does not account *the desire for certainty* as his inmost craving and deepest distress [----] (Nietzsche, 1974, 2)<sup>12</sup>

Here Nietzsche sets up the arena in which truth claims are to be justified. If anti-metaphysical realist truth is independent of our cognitive capacities but dependent

on our cognitive interests, then, it is dependent on what is intelligible or conceivable to us, and thus on our in principle best reasons for holding a belief.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Clark states that anti-metaphysical realism must reject the metaphysical realist view that

[---] truth is independent not only of what *we* could in principle have reason to accept, but also of what *any conceivable intelligence* [my italics] could have reason to accept, given *our* best standards of rational acceptability. (Clark, 1990, p.48)

The anti-metaphysical realist model outlined above is somewhat similar to the one proffered by Donald Davidson. Davidson argues that it is conceivable that there are beings with superior cognitive capacities to our own. Such a being would be what Davidson terms the ‘omniscient interpreter’. According to Davidson, the omniscient interpreter can only deem our beliefs false by entering into cognitive communication with us. The possibility of such communication, however, presupposes a background of agreement on most matters. Thus, Davidson contends that “objective error can occur only in a setting of largely true belief”. (Davidson, 1984, p. 200) From this we can see that the omniscient interpreter can cast our perspectival belief into massive error only within the framework of our own standards of rational acceptability. The possibility of massive error, in other words, must be translatable into a rational format familiar to us. Metaphysical realism, according to Nietzsche, is one such untranslatable position. Such an untranslatable viewpoint can have, in Nietzsche’s view, no cognitive purchase for

us. It would be a view from Nowhere, an impossible attempt to “look around our own corner”.

### **Two Objections**

At this point it will be fruitful for us to consider two possible objections to the reconstruction of Nietzsche’s anti-sceptical epistemology outlined above. As I shall suggest, both objections emerge from a misunderstanding of the role that Nietzsche’s perspectivism plays in this epistemology. This specific role can be clarified by responding to these objections.

The first objection argues that unless Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical realist account of truth allows for properties in the world that transcend our interests or perspectives, Nietzsche is committed to a form of subjective idealism in the sense that to be is to be of some interest to a human cognitive subject.<sup>14</sup> The second objection responds by suggesting that if this is not the case and Nietzsche is not committed to such an idealist view, then, he must allow for extra-perspectival properties in the world and in so doing, Nietzsche despite his claims to the contrary, embraces metaphysical realism.<sup>15</sup> In what follows I shall suggest that these objections may be allowed to stand only if we construe Nietzsche’s perspectivism as primarily a metaphysical thesis rather than an epistemic one.

In order to allay the first objection, then, we must be clear about what is meant by perspectives or cognitive interests. It seems to me that Nietzsche’s *perspectivism* must be construed primarily as an epistemic thesis about the conditions of our



knowledge. This is not to deny, however, that Nietzsche puts forward a first-order perspectival thesis. The metaphysics of the will to power puts forward the view that reality comprises a hierarchy of perspectival forces. However, Nietzsche suggests that this metaphysical position derives from his epistemic thesis regarding the importance of method in the justification of our beliefs. He claims that “In the end, we are not only allowed to perform such an experiment, we are commanded to do so by the conscience of our *method*.” (Nietzsche, 1998a, 36) Elsewhere he emphasizes the importance of methodology when he writes “the most valuable insights are arrived at last; but the most valuable insights are *methods*”. (Nietzsche, 1968, 469. Cf. Nietzsche, 1990, 59). As is evident from *The Gay Science*, 2 and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III, 12 rigorous methodology, for Nietzsche, involves considering reasons for and against a belief. It involves a multi-perspectival viewpoint. This does not involve seeing something from many different perspectives simultaneously, but rather the attempt to view many perspectives under one unifying comprehensive explanatory perspective. Thus Nietzsche emphasizes the idea of a “uniform science” in *The Anti-Christ*, 59 and in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 36 he sees the will to power as unifying perspectives available in both the human and the natural sciences. The will to power metaphysics is thus seen as a rejection of the mechanistic account of causality and in *BGE*, 19 it accounts, in Nietzsche’s view, for the complex phenomenon of human willing. On this basis, it seems to me that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is primarily a second-order thesis regarding the possibility of knowledge and the justification of our beliefs. However, perspectivism is secondarily and in a derivative way, a first-order metaphysical thesis about the constitution of reality

and our participation in it. The point that I want to make here is that within the epistemic context in which we are presently discussing Nietzsche's perspectivism, I take *perspectivism* to maintain that our manner of knowing the world is perspectival and not that the world itself is metaphysically *reducible* to our perspectives. Thus, for Nietzsche, perspectives at the second-order level are conditions of *knowing* the world but they do not constitute the world.<sup>16</sup> This does not, however, reintroduce the very dualism that I have argued Nietzsche rejects. For Nietzsche's quarrel with the dualism inherent in metaphysical realism, we recall, centres round the idea that ultimate reality is cognitively inaccessible by perspectival means. We have seen that by rejecting the coherency of the thing-in-itself Nietzsche contends that reality is in principle available to our knowledge. However, he is concerned to emphasize the non-constitutive nature of our knowing in order to avoid the idea that reality can be carved up in multiple incommensurate ways. This idea would disallow the possibility that some perspectives are more justified than others and would, consequently, collapse into the very dissociation of truth and justification that he aims to overcome. Nietzsche's response to this dissociation, then, involves heeding Kant's warning that all knowledge takes place from the specifically human point of view, whilst modifying Kant's argument by claiming that our perspectives do not "make" the world but rather regulatively "direct" our inquiry according to our perspectival interests. By abandoning the idea that we constitute the world Nietzsche argues that we are, as knowers, immersed within the world as evolving parts of a larger whole. The world is thus no longer construed as an object that is divorced from

our knowledge but rather one that is available in principle to our best practices of justification.

However, the second objection suggests that if our perspectives do not constitute the world then Nietzsche must allow for extra-perspectival (that is, non-reducible) properties in the world. The objection here is that if Nietzsche does allow such non-reducible properties then he is guilty of metaphysical realism. That he does allow that there are non-reducible properties in the world can be seen from his many statements where he claims that we can only selectively perceive the world.

For example, he writes:

[---] we have senses for only a selection of perceptions – those with which we have to concern ourselves in order to preserve ourselves. (Nietzsche, 1968, 505)

In the light of the epistemic understanding of Nietzsche's *perspectivism* that I am proposing, the most fruitful way of reading Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysical realism is as a thesis about knowability. To re-iterate, metaphysical realism as it has been presented in this paper represents, for Nietzsche, the view that the world is inaccessible to our perspectival mode of knowing. Inaccessibility is here taken as synonymous with the possibility of massive error. The world is inaccessible in the light of the demise of pure *a priori* forms of knowledge, which it seems from my adumbration of it earlier, is the only mode of access to the "real" world for the metaphysical realist. The "true" world in this metaphysical realist sense, following the demise of rationalist metaphysics, is construed as the "hidden" but proper

*foundation* of our epistemological claims. As such it is independent of our cognitive interests in the sense that our human perspectival take on reality may be radically false. In this context the possibility of non-reducible properties is problematic for Nietzsche only if they are capable of casting our in principle best-justified perspectival truths into massive error. However, we have seen that this possibility is unintelligible in the sense of untranslatable to us and therefore of no cognitive purchase. If this is the case, then, Nietzsche's acceptance that the world itself is metaphysically independent of us and so not reducible to our perspectives is unproblematic for the status of our epistemic claims. What Nietzsche's perspectival theory of knowledge does rule out, however, is the possibility of a supra-perspectival and therefore God's Eye View of the world. The God's Eye View is committed to a recognition-transcendent view of truth. As such Nietzsche's metaphysical realist is akin to what John Haldane terms the ultra-realist that insists upon "the unconditional transcendence of reality over our natural means of coming to know about the world". (Haldane, 1993, p. 34) We may construe Nietzsche's *perspectivism*, then, as an attempt to counteract such an ultra-realist foundationalist theory in favour of a perspectival and anti-foundationalist view.

Thus Nietzsche construes perspectives as conditions of knowledge that provide the contextual basis of justification. He writes:

There are no isolated judgments! An isolated judgment is never 'true', never knowledge, only in the connection [*Zusammenhänge*] and relation [*Beziehung*] of many judgments is there any surety [*Bürgschaft*] (Nietzsche, 1968, 530)

Here Nietzsche suggests, contrary to the metaphysical realist, that the standard of judgement is always another judgement. For Nietzsche, our beliefs are not justified through extra-perspectival confrontation with the world. He suggests that there are no privileged beliefs and that our beliefs must be mutually reinforced in the context of other beliefs. From this we can see that Nietzsche's *perspectivism* rejects the metaphysical realist understanding of objectivity as a God's Eye View from Nowhere in favour of a multi-perspectival viewpoint that overcomes the metaphysical realist decoupling of truth and justification. This is achieved by rejecting the notion of truth-in-itself in favour of Nietzsche's conception of truth *for us* whereby our in principle best practices of justification determine truth.

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival "knowing"; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter [---] that much more complete will our "concept" of this matter, our "objectivity" be. (Nietzsche, 1998b, III, 12)

It is suggested here that if objectivity is defined by our perspectival take on the world, then truth cannot globally transcend our in principle best-justified human beliefs. This does not mean that we have the best reasons for supporting a belief right now. As such our predominant beliefs (our present best-justified beliefs) may be erroneous or partial in some way. What it does entail is that reality is not in

principle cut off from our cognitive constitution. Moreover, Nietzsche suggests that we have acquired sufficient knowledge thus far to enable us to both proceed further with our investigations and to adjudicate the epistemic worth of competing beliefs. This is suggested by Nietzsche's claim that although mechanism has understood the model of causality incorrectly that does not mean that we abandon the concept of causality or our search for causal laws in nature. Rather, for Nietzsche it involves abandoning the mechanist 'push and pull' theory of causality in favour of a more refined account of causal connection inspired by Boscovich's physics of action at a distance. Thus Nietzsche writes that we need not abandon the concept of causality altogether. What we should reconsider, however, is what he calls the "most usual explanations". (Nietzsche, 1998c, VI: 5). Thus Nietzsche suggests that much of what we accept as justified and true in the commonsense world of our experience is a coarse understanding of things. Nietzsche argues that a more finely grained or more comprehensive perspective is both possible and desirable.

It is in this context that Nietzsche suggests that the recoupling of truth and justification takes place by incorporating partial or limited perspectives into the most comprehensive perspective on the nature of things. The most comprehensive perspective, for Nietzsche, is one that sufficiently explains the nature of the world and our participation in it. Thus he writes, "every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations". (Nietzsche, 1968, 616). Nietzsche's perspectivism thus rejects the metaphysical realist quest for absolute standards of correctness. An intrinsic component of this rejection is the dissolution of the

distinction between appearance and cognitively inaccessible reality. Rather, for Nietzsche, what we have are more or less comprehensive perspectives on things or what he calls lighter and darker shades of appearance. (Nietzsche, 1998a, 36). Within these shades there is room for correction and revision. However, the idea of an inaccessible reality and the related idea of massive error dissolves. Thus Nietzsche can write that

The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world is reduced to the antithesis “world” and “nothing”. (Nietzsche, 1968, 567)

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It has become standard in Nietzsche studies to comment on the textual issue in order to justify one's use of particular texts from amongst Nietzsche's corpus of writings. A complete discussion of the textual issue is beyond the scope of the present analysis. However, I shall focus principally on Nietzsche's "mature" writings from *Human, All Too Human* as it is arguably from this point onwards that Nietzsche explicitly states that the thing-in-itself cannot play a role in our knowledge. The reader should also note that I will appeal to some passages from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*. I concur with Richard Schacht when he describes the *Nachlass* as the workshop of Nietzsche's published writings. On this basis, it seems to me that cautious reference to these notes is justified to the extent that they shed light on Nietzsche's published writings. See Richard Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche: reflections Timely and Untimely*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 118-119.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, our commonsense discourse of middle-sized objects is arguably not globally false. Our commonsense discourse is, however, a more narrow perspective, in Nietzsche's view, than that which describes those objects more comprehensively as hierarchical organizations of force-wills. The reason that the latter perspective is more comprehensive, for Nietzsche, is that it has, in his view, explanatory scope across both the human and the natural sciences. For an interesting discussion of Nietzsche's will to power thesis as a doctrine of the unity of the sciences see R. Lanier Anderson, "Nietzsche's Will to Power as a Doctrine of the Unity of Science", in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Volume 25, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Poellner emphasizes Nietzsche's sceptical views in *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Maudemarie Clark sees him as a non-sceptic in *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this term from Maudemarie Clark. Other commentators such as David Owen in *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity*, (London: Sage Publications, 1995) and Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche's Conscience*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1998) have also used it. As will be seen, I employ this term in a specifically epistemic sense.

<sup>6</sup> It may be thought that Nietzsche's view that reality is ultimately will to power does little to avoid this dilemma for it creates a picture of reality that is alien to our commonsense view. However, this is arguably not the case if we understand the will to power as an *explanation* of our commonsense reality. Explanations involve going beyond the thing that requires explanation. Otherwise we would merely appeal to the very thing that requires explanation as an explanation. This is precisely what Nietzsche criticizes as "simply repeating the question" in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> What I call "metaphysical realism" here is similar to what Michael Williams calls "epistemic realism" in *Unnatural Doubts*. I follow Maudemarie Clark in using the term "metaphysical realism", however, because it captures Nietzsche's view that the epistemological issues of truth and justification have been intertwined with dualist metaphysics throughout the history of philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> As I am concerned to outline Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with metaphysical realism, I am interested in Kant's philosophy here only to the extent that it makes manifest Nietzsche's contention with this world-view. I will therefore refrain from commenting on the accuracy of this particular, historically-rooted, interpretation of Kant.

<sup>9</sup> I have borrowed this term from Michael Williams, "Realism and Scepticism" in John Haldane and Crispin Wright eds. *Reality, Representation and Projection*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 193-215.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that Nietzsche thinks that our in principle best-justified beliefs are "mere" perspectives. For it is clear from some of his comments, for example, on Christianity, that he thinks that some perspectives are better, in the sense of being more justified, than others. See, for example, *The Gay Science*, 151.

<sup>11</sup> The distinction between cognitive capacities and interests is to be understood here as a distinction between the acquisition of knowledge and the justification of knowledge respectively. For a discussion of these issues see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche's appeal to certainty here is not an appeal to dogmatic or unrevisable truth. Rather, the quest for certainty of which Nietzsche speaks pertains to the quest for the best reasons in support of a belief. In *The Gay Science*, 319 Nietzsche again insists on "intellectual conscience" and the need to "scrutinize our experiences as severely as a scientific experiment".

<sup>13</sup> Clark takes this argument to entail that our present best-justified theory may be false but that reality is not, in principle, divorced from our cognitive constitution. (Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, pp. 50-51). What I want to argue is that, according to Nietzsche, our present-justified theories are not radically false though they may be partial perspectives and so limited in scope.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche rejects subjective idealism in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 15. He writes at *Beyond Good and Evil*, 36 that "I do not mean the material world as a delusion, as 'appearance' or 'representation' (in the Berkeleian or Schopenhauerian sense), but rather as a world with the same level of reality that our emotion has" –"

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, pp. 33-4.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Leiter attributes a similar position to Nietzsche in "Perspectivism in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*" in Richard Schacht ed. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, (London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 350.

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