



**Perspectivism and Truth in Nietzsche’s Philosophy:
A Critical Look at the Apparent Contradiction**

By Nate Olson

“There are no truths,” states one. “Well, if so, then is your statement true?” asks another. This statement and following question go a long way in demonstrating the crucial problem that any investigator of Nietzsche’s conceptions of perspectivism and truth encounters. How can one who believes that one’s conception of truth depends on the perspective from which one writes (as Nietzsche seems to believe) also posit anything resembling a universal truth (as Nietzsche seems to present the will to power, eternal recurrence, and the *Übermensch*)? Given this idea that there is no truth outside of a perspective, a transcendent truth, how can a philosopher make any claims at all which are valid outside his personal perspective? This is the question that Maudemarie Clark declares Nietzsche commentators from Heidegger and Kaufmann to Derrida and even herself have been trying to answer. The sheer amount of material that has been written and continues to be written on this conundrum demonstrates that this question will not be satisfactorily resolved here, but I will try to show that a resolution can be found. And this resolution need not sacrifice Nietzsche’s idea of perspectivism for finding some “truth” in his philosophy, or vice versa. One, however, ought to look at Nietzsche’s philosophical “truths” not in a metaphysical manner but as, when taken collectively, the best way to live one’s life in the absence of an absolute truth.

By looking at one of Nietzsche’s specific postulations of perspectivism, we can get a better idea of precisely how this term applies to his philosophy and how it relates to the “truthfulness” of his other claims. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche begins with a chapter entitled “On the Prejudices of Philosophers.” Almost immediately he begins to tear into the lack of integrity on the part of traditional philosophers who present their ideas as the product of pure reason. Nietzsche declaims, “they pose as having discovered and attained their real opinions through the self-evolution of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic: while what happens at bottom is that a *prejudice*, a notion, an ‘inspiration,’ generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, which will be referred to as *BGE*, I.5). Thus, philosophical insights are not the universal claims to truth that philosophers have presented them as and wished them to be. The philosophy of an individual is precisely that, not a product “of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic.”

This example is typical of the very personal method that Nietzsche uses in his philosophy. (This method is what generates his perspectivism.) For him, every idea has a life, a skin wrapped around it through which it is presented to the world and by which it is created. It would be fallacious to look at a philosopher’s ideas without looking at the philosopher who was motivated to write them down. Nietzsche regarded

himself, as Richard Solomon points out, “first and foremost as a psychologist.” And as a psychologist, he was perhaps more interested in what led someone to believe something rather than what they actually believed.

The very next section after the previous quote in *Beyond Good and Evil* supports this hypothesis of Nietzsche as a “psychologist.” Nietzsche states that “It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir” (*BGE* I.6). While this quotation shows another instance of Nietzsche looking at the personal aspect of philosophy, the most important word in the quotation may be that these personal touches are “unconscious.” Nietzsche’s perception that these prejudices which characterize a philosopher’s work remain unconscious to his readers is the main impetus for Nietzsche to do his work. He wants to make these “unconscious” prejudices, conscious; he wants us to question what we have not questioned before.

If we are doomed (or blessed, depending on *your* perspective) to always view the world from our own point of view, then one can never know an absolute truth. Nietzsche states that in light of perspectivism the very idea of an absolute truth is unintelligible, so there can be no absolute truth to be known. He writes, “I shall reiterate a hundred times that ‘immediate certainty’, like ‘absolute knowledge’ and ‘thing in itself,’ contains a *contradictio in adjecto* [contradiction in terms]: we really ought to get free from the seduction of words!” (*BGE* I.16). All of these terms, ‘immediate certainty,’ ‘absolute knowledge,’ and ‘thing in itself’, are ways that Western philosophers beginning with Plato, the originator of the ‘thing in itself’, to Kant and even Schopenhauer have explained their position that there is a more valuable transcendental world that is untouched by our petty prejudices. It is through Nietzsche’s idea of perspectivism that the world of absolutes, as posited by a specific philosopher, becomes a contradiction in terms. For, as Nietzsche has made clear, no person can ever write untouched by these worldly prejudices.

Although Nietzsche has made it clear that we can never know an absolute truth, he deplores the scepticism that he sees as rampant in the Europe of his time. Just because one does not know that one’s beliefs are true does not mean that one should not forcefully will them to be true. Indeed, if there is no transcendental truth, we are given the freedom to *create* truth as we want it to be. However, Nietzsche sees a prevalent scepticism, one might even call it “nihilism,” in Europe that has resulted from his cultural “death of God” and usually produces a “paralysis of will” (*BGE* VI.208) that Nietzsche despises. He believes that humans need to continue to act in the face of this uncertainty, which should be viewed as the opportunity to create something new rather than an ominous burden preventing us from moving.

However, Nietzsche perceives that a person cannot act while examining his actions with an uncertain eye. A person must believe his or her actions to be *the* true and just ways to act even if this belief is a lie. In *The Will to Power*, he writes this idea as “truth is the kind of error without which a certain being could not live” (*The Will to Power* 493). To see that this “certain kind of being” to which he is referring is definitely humanity, one need only look to *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he says that “for the purpose of preserving beings such as ourselves, such judgements [synthetic *a priori* judgements] must be *believed* to be true; although they might of course still be *false* judgements!” (*BGE* I.11). Therefore, we humans need to act as if we are certain of what we are doing even though we cannot be certain.

It is at this point that Nietzsche begins to get himself into the sticky situation of advocating how humanity should act at this point in history, a point we can only truly recognize we have reached when we acknowledge perspectivism. But it is perspectivism itself which, in turn, would seem to prevent Nietzsche from making any type of universal claim about the world. Nietzsche, however, holds forth with his doctrines of eternal recurrence, the will to power, and the *Übermensch*. I follow Richard Solomon's lead in interpreting this "famous triad of Zarathrustrian doctrines" not as "grand philosophical theses" but as "attitudes towards life" (Solomon 186). Perhaps it is going too far to deny that these doctrines are philosophical theses, but it is an apt point that they should not be considered as theses that are metaphysically true.

Nietzsche may be a philosopher who is more interested in the personal aspect of philosophy than the impersonal, formality of the subject, but he is enough of a traditional philosopher to recognize a contradiction when he sees it. And if he were to postulate that the will to power, eternal recurrence and the *Übermensch* were metaphysically and transcendentally true, he would obviously be stating a contradiction. The idea that these doctrines are "attitudes towards life" seems to me plausible if we return to Nietzsche's idea that given the uncertainty of the world, we need to *create* values. By looking at the world through the lens of the will to power, eternal recurrence and the *Übermensch*, we are shown criteria by which we can determine how life-affirming our lives are. (The degree to which a life is life affirming is the standard by which Nietzsche chooses to value a life.) Consequently, if these doctrines serve their purpose to help determine if a life is life-affirming or not, Nietzsche should not care if they are metaphysically true or not. He even writes, "The falseness of a judgement is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgement...The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding" (*BGE* I.4). If truth, then, is not the most important value to Nietzsche, it would seem that he would not make metaphysical claims to truth if he didn't need to.

Another justification for this "attitude towards life" interpretation of eternal recurrence, the will to power, and the *Übermensch* is given by Solomon. His point is that to say that there is not a metaphysical truth is not to say that there are not varying levels of truthfulness. He writes, "Perspectives and interpretations are always subject to measure, not by comparison with some external 'truth,' perhaps, but by evaluation in their context and according to the purposes for which they are adopted." (Solomon 196). In other words, one can evaluate a perspective according to how well the writer uses the tools her perspective gives her, e.g. logic or reasoning, and how much her purposes for writing were likely to affect the content of the work.

Nietzsche himself gives credence to this theory in his explanation of what the true philosopher should be. In the second part of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche fondly speaks of "the free spirits" who "are born, sworn, jealous friends of *solitude*" (*BGE* II.44). A true philosopher, this "free spirit," needs the space that solitude brings in order to distance himself from the spirit of the times that would infect his philosophy. That Nietzsche values this philosophy of distance shows that he feels perspectives can be more and less influenced by the culture of which one is part. One could create a more valuable perspective for one's self if one is allowed to expand one's perspective. This would allow for Solomon's idea that some perspectives are more valuable than others are.

Maudemarie Clark, in her book *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, presents a much different picture of the apparent contradiction between Nietzsche's perspectivism and his conception of truth. Her interpretation is based on a different idea of what Nietzsche's perspectivism fundamentally is. She states that to say that there is no "nonperspectival seeing" is not to say that there is not an "omniperspectival seeing" (Clark 145). This is tantamount to saying that just because we can perceive an absolute truth from one individual limited perspective is not to say that there is no absolute truth out there, which is obviously a valid argument. She goes on to say that this situation of seeing from a limited perspective "means not merely that we cannot know all there is to know, but that what we know is only partially true, that it would be completely true only if we supplemented it by the way things appear from other perspectives" (Clark 146). Her point, then, is that Nietzsche, in his last six works (from *The Genealogy of Morals* to *The Antichrist*), does not claim anymore that knowledge falsifies and, in fact, seems to believe that science can be a means to reaching this unified, and therefore absolutely true, perspective (Clark 103). So her way of looking at Nietzsche's perspectivism is far from the earlier stated interpretation in that she allows for a much more impersonal and unified interpretation of Nietzsche's idea.

Clark's remarks that Nietzsche's ideas on truth changed after writing *Beyond Good and Evil* will not be empirically refuted here, but Clark's belief that Nietzsche late in life submitted to a form of objectivism seems completely contrary to his stated philosophy. For a philosopher of the nature of Nietzsche who found it most interesting and beneficial to focus on the personal in philosophy, whether it be how the baggage of a person's existence creeps into his philosophy or how morality is a personal, creative undertaking, it would seem wholly out of character to submit to any claims for an impersonal interpretation of truth. Even if one compiled all the perspectives in the world on a particular subject, these perspectives mean nothing until they are *interpreted* by a person looking at them out of his or her own confined perspective. As Solomon writes, "Loose talk about perspectives, as if they were nothing but potential viewpoints, leaves out the critical aspect of Nietzsche's perspectivism: The fact that a perspective is *occupied*" (Solomon 197). Therefore, the idea that Nietzsche in his later works believed that there could exist a conglomeration of perspectives that would approach "absolute truth" seems rather ridiculous. Why would such a personal philosopher care if there could be such an absolute truth, if no one who could appreciate its objectivity exists?

One need not make the conclusion that Nietzsche does not always strictly adhere to his notion of personal perspectivism, as Clark does, or that Nietzsche does not mean intend his "doctrines" to be interpreted as a type of truth to resolve the apparent contradiction between these two ideas. However, the type of truth ascribed to eternal recurrence, the will to power and the *Übermensch* cannot be a *metaphysical* truth. As is consistent with Nietzsche's stance as a personal philosopher these ideas are best looked upon as "attitudes towards life" which help one to live life in the most life affirming way possible. Yet Nietzsche's lack of a direct response to this apparent contradiction ensures that this matter will continue to be hotly debated well into the future. For this seemingly simple contradiction of positing truths when one has denied all absolute truths, Nietzsche gives a very complex and personal answer.

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