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# Nietzsche, Truth, and the Horror of Existence

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## Abstract

Some argue that for Nietzsche there are truths and that knowledge of them is both possible and desirable. Others think that Nietzsche rejects the possibility of truth and that this gives rise to problems of self-contradiction. I argue that there *is* truth for Nietzsche. The truth is that existence is horrible. Truth exists. We can know this truth. But it would likely mean our annihilation. Thus, truth *must be avoided*—which is different from, despite the fact that it will often appear the same as, claiming that truth simply does not exist. Truth not only *must* be avoided, but we have through long evolution actually learned to avoid it. We have buried it beneath the sediment of millennia. Truth is possible—at least conceptually possible. We do not have to worry about self-contradiction. But truth is most difficult to get at and thus, *fortunately*, is unavailable to us.

## I

This article<sup>1</sup> will argue that at the center of Nietzsche's vision lies his concept of the "terror and horror of existence."<sup>2</sup> As he puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

"King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus....When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.'"<sup>3</sup>

Why is it best never to have been born? Because all we can expect as human beings is to suffer. Yet, still, this is not precisely the problem. In a passage most central to this article's interpretation of the horror of existence, and a passage found not in Nietzsche's early but in one of his very late writings (in *Genealogy of Morals*, III, §28), Nietzsche tells us that human beings can live with suffering, what they cannot live with is *meaningless* suffering—suffering for no reason at all.<sup>4</sup> In Nietzsche's view, we are "surrounded by a fearful *void*..."<sup>5</sup> We live in an empty, meaningless cosmos. We cannot look into reality without being overcome. Indeed, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche suggests that "it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish..."<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it was not just intellectual reflection that led Nietzsche to a belief in the horror of existence. He lived it *himself*.<sup>7</sup> In a letter of April 10, 1888, he writes:

Around 1876 my health grew worse....There were extremely painful and obstinate headaches which exhausted all my strength. They increased over long years, to reach a climax at which pain was habitual, so that any given year contained for me two hundred days of pain....My specialty was to endure the extremity of pain...with complete lucidity for two or three days in succession, with continuous vomiting of mucus.<sup>8</sup>

The following year, in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, he tells us how significant this suffering was for him:

I have often asked myself whether I am not much more deeply indebted to the hardest years of my life than to any others.... And as to my prolonged illness, do I not owe much more to it than I owe to my health? To it I owe a *higher* kind of health, a sort of health which grows stronger under everything that does not actually kill it!—*To it, I owe even my philosophy*.... Only great suffering is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit.... Only great suffering; that great suffering, under which we seem to be over a fire of greenwood, the suffering that takes its time—forces us philosophers to descend into our nethermost depths...<sup>9</sup>

Nietzsche's belief in the horror of existence is largely, if not completely, overlooked by most scholars.<sup>10</sup> This article hopes to show that it had a profound effect on his thought, indeed, that his thought cannot be adequately understood without seeing the centrality of this concept. To begin to understand its importance, let us consider three different visions of the human condition.

The first holds that we live in a benign cosmos. It is as if it were purposively planned for us and we for it. We fit, we belong, we are at home in this cosmos. We are confirmed and reinforced by it. And our natural response is a desire to know it, to contemplate it, and thus to appreciate our fit into it. Let us call this the *designed cosmos*. Roughly speaking, it is the traditional view held by most philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through the medievals. And for the most part it has disappeared in the modern world—few believe in it any more.

The second vision backs off from the assumptions required by the first. This view starts with Francis Bacon, if not before, and it is the view of most moderns. Here the cosmos is neither alien nor is it designed for us. It is neither terrifying nor benign. The cosmos is neutral and, most importantly, it is malleable. What human beings must do is come to understand the cosmos through science and control it through technology. We must *make* it fit us. It does not fit us by design. We must work on it, transform it, and mold it into a place where we can be at home. We must create our own place. Thus, for such modern thinkers, we actually end up with more than the ancients and medievals had. We end up with a fit like they had, but we get the added satisfaction of bringing it about *ourselves*,

accomplishing it through our own endeavor, individuality, and freedom. Let us call this the *perfectible cosmos*.

The third vision takes the cosmos to be alien. It was not designed for human beings at all, nor they for it. We do not fit. We do not belong. *And we never will*. The cosmos is horrible, terrifying, and we will never surmount this fact. It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all. Best never to have been born. Let us call this the *horrific cosmos*. This is Nietzsche's view.

Nietzsche simply dismisses the first view, the designed cosmos, which few believe in anymore anyway.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Nietzsche takes the second view, that of a perfectible cosmos, very seriously. He resists it with every fiber of his being.<sup>12</sup> For Nietzsche, we must stop wasting time and energy hoping to change things, improve them, make progress<sup>13</sup>—the outlook of liberals, socialists, even Christians, all of whom Nietzsche tends to lump together and excoriate. For Nietzsche, we cannot eliminate suffering and to keep hoping we can will simply weaken us. Instead, we must conceal an alien and terrifying cosmos if we hope to live in it. And we must develop the strength to do so. We must toughen ourselves. We need more suffering, not less. It has "created all enhancements of man so far..."<sup>14</sup>

If we look deeply into the essence of things, into the horror of existence, Nietzsche thinks we will be overwhelmed—paralyzed. Like Hamlet we will not be able to act, because we see that action can "not change anything in the eternal nature of things."<sup>15</sup> We must see, Nietzsche says, that "a profound *illusion*...first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakeable faith that thought...can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct..."<sup>16</sup> In Nietzsche's view, we cannot change things. Instead, with Hamlet we should "feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that [we] should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint."<sup>17</sup>

One might think this silly. After all, isn't it just obvious that we can change things, reduce suffering, improve existence, make progress? Isn't it just absurd for Nietzsche to reject the possibility of significant change? Hasn't such change already occurred?

We must admit, however, that even if we believe it will be possible to continuously reduce suffering, it is very unlikely we will ever eliminate it. And if that is so, if there will always be some suffering, then it remains a real question whether it is not better to adopt Nietzsche's view, to face suffering, use it as a discipline, perhaps even increase it, so as to toughen ourselves, rather than let it weaken us, allow it to dominate us, by our continually hoping to overcome it.

But whatever we decide about the possibility or impossibility of reducing suffering, the question may well become moot:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever progress we might think we are making in reducing suffering, whatever change we think we are bringing about, it may all amount to nothing more than a short and accidental moment in biological time, whose imminent disappearance will finally confirm the horror and meaninglessness of existence.

Nietzsche, of course, does not reject *all* forms of change. After all, he has a theory of will to power and of the *Übermensch*. What he rejects is the sort of change necessary for a perfectible cosmos. He rejects the notion that science and technology can transform the eternal nature of things—he rejects the notion that human effort can end or significantly reduce physical suffering. Instead, he only thinks it possible to build up the power necessary to construct meaning in a meaningless world and thus to hide the horror of existence. The horror of existence cannot be eliminated. It can only be concealed.

We cannot dismiss Nietzsche's view simply because it goes counter to the assumptions of Christianity, science, liberalism, socialism, and so forth. And we certainly cannot dismiss this view if

we hope to understand Nietzsche. At any rate, for Nietzsche, we cannot eliminate suffering, we can only seek to mask it.

## II

Let us try to draw out the philosophical implications that follow from the horror of existence. If existence really is horrible, if to know it completely, as Nietzsche suggests in *Beyond Good and Evil*, means we are likely to perish,<sup>19</sup> then knowledge of the truth cannot be good for us. The horror of existence, if we think through its consequences, will put us radically at odds with perhaps the most fundamental assumption of philosophy since Plato and Aristotle, namely, that the true and the good coincide. Philosophers assume that the truth—far from being harmful—will be good for us. And what is really good for us will necessarily be something that is not an illusion or a lie but the truth. As Nietzsche puts it: "All supreme values are of the first rank, all the supreme concepts...the good, the true...neither can these supreme concepts be incommensurate with one another, be incompatible with one another..."<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche also says, "I seek to understand out of what idiosyncrasy that Socratic equation reason = virtue = happiness derives: that bizarrest of equations and one which has in particular all the instincts of the older Hellenes against it."<sup>21</sup> For Socrates, the true, the good, and happiness coincide.

So also, in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that the highest happiness is activity in accord with the highest excellence, that is, the contemplative activity of the intellect.<sup>22</sup> Let us grant Aristotle, for the sake of argument, that the life of the intellect is the highest life. Still, we would have to ask why such a life would necessarily make us happy? There is a hidden assumption buried in Aristotle's argument.

If we were to look back to Sophocles, for example, it would not at all be the case for him that the life of the intellect—theoretical wisdom—could be expected to make us happy. Such wisdom would allow us to see more deeply into the truth of things and thus to see what a miserable, terrible, and alien cosmos we live in. We would see into the horror of existence. Both Sophocles and Nietzsche

quote the wisdom of Silenus. Best never to have been born; second best, die as soon as possible. All we can expect in this world is to suffer.<sup>23</sup>

This, obviously, is not Aristotle's view. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle tells us, approvingly, "that Anaxagoras answered a man who was raising problems...and asking why one should choose rather to be born than not by saying 'for the sake of viewing the heavens and the whole order of the universe'."<sup>24</sup> For Aristotle, "existence is to all men a thing to be chosen and loved..."<sup>25</sup> For Aristotle, human beings fit the cosmos, they belong, they are at home. It is as if the cosmos and human beings were designed for each other. And so at least a part of pursuing the contemplative life would mean contemplating one's fit in the cosmos—and this quite plausibly could make one happy.

For virtue to be compatible with happiness it is necessary that the individual acting virtuously fit the world. We cannot be happy if we continually grate against existence. So also, if knowing the truth about existence is to be compatible with happiness, the truth cannot be that existence is horrible and terrifying. If to be happy, we must avoid knowing the truth, if we must conceal it, if we must lie about it, then the true and the good are not compatible. If the truth is that existence is horrible and terrifying, then the life of the intellect cannot produce happiness, and the good for human beings cannot be the contemplative life of the intellect. Truth, goodness, and happiness would not accord.

But Plato and Aristotle insist they do accord. If we could free ourselves from our chains, for Plato, if we could climb up out of the cave, if we could get used to looking at the sun, we would see that the idea of the good is not only compatible with, but is the very source of, the true.<sup>26</sup> The last thing we would want would be to return to the bottom of the cave. Contemplating the true and the good, for Plato, would be the highest happiness.<sup>27</sup> Here, the truth is not horror and terror. Though, it must be said, those still at the bottom of the cave might disagree. Like Jocasta, they seem to think it best not to know.<sup>28</sup>

But the view of most, and certainly the view of modern science, is that human rationality can discover the truth, that this is good for human beings, and that it will lead to overall progress for humanity, that is, to increasing happiness. As Lange argues in his *History of Materialism*, which

Nietzsche carefully read,<sup>29</sup> "Holbach starts from the principle that the truth can never be injurious. He derives this from the wider proposition that theoretical principles...can never be dangerous."<sup>30</sup> Lange goes on to say that science needs to build up:

a kingdom of the true, the good, and the beautiful....With the attainment of truth, it results from this principle that a fuller and higher humanity is also attained....Here, then, we have, in the full sense of the word, a *dogma* which not only is not proved, but which, in fact, when logically tested, is *not true*, but which, if held as an *idea*, may, indeed, like any other religious idea, edify mankind and raise him above the limits of sense.<sup>31</sup>

While Lange does not consider the agreement of the true and the good to be a truth, he nevertheless considers it to be an edifying idea. Nietzsche flatly rejects all of this: "For a philosopher to say, 'the good and the beautiful are one,' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true,' one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly....We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*."<sup>32</sup> He also says, "There is no preestablished harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being," that is, the good, "of humanity."<sup>33</sup>

There is nothing Nietzsche would reject more, we can say, than Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>34</sup> We cannot climb up out of the cave and look directly at the truth. It would probably kill us. There is a reason why we are down in the cave with our backs to the truth. All that advice that circulates at the bottom of the cave, that we should stay there, that it is lunacy to try to get out, is *damned* good advice. It is true that the shadows at the bottom of the cave are illusions, distortions, lies. But it is not true that the shadows lock us into a prison. They keep out the horror. They preserve life. Life exists, *only exists*, at the bottom of the cave.

The truth is not good for human beings—the truth is horror. Reality as it truly is, is not beautiful—it is terrifying. To pursue the truth, far from pursuing the good and achieving happiness, as most all philosophers have assumed, would have the consequence of plunging humankind into the abyss, of rubbing their noses in the horror of existence. Life requires lies, illusion, art, veiling. Life

must shun the truth. Life is not possible with the truth. To pursue the good, what is best for human beings, requires rejection of the true.

One might try to respond that while it is obviously the case that some things are not good for us, nevertheless, *knowing the truth* is always good for us. It is certainly best for us to know what is bad, dangerous, threatening, and so forth. It might help us to avoid such things. But if existence is truly alien, if to come to know the truth means we are likely to perish, if it would put an end to human life, if existence is *ontologically* horrible (not just occasionally irritating), then Jocasta is right, *knowing the truth* is not good for us. Another way to put this is to say that Nietzsche raises the question: what is the *value* of truth?<sup>35</sup> As for Plato, this is to put the good above the true, but for Nietzsche it is not at all to value the truth positively. Nietzsche's answer is that from the perspective of life the true may well lack value. That is the subversive proposition Nietzsche wants to force us to think about.

Most any philosophy (or science, or religion) wants to do two different things. It wants in a very straightforward way simply to get at the truth. It has a commitment to, even a deep passion for, the truth—Nietzsche calls this *will to truth*. It has a drive to weed out the false and discover the true. At the same time, and (it thinks) as a consequence of this commitment to the truth, it seeks meaning and purpose, it wants to achieve the good for human beings. What could be more obvious—even trivial? So, on the one hand, we have a desire to get to the real truth—good old honest correspondence with reality. Secondly, we expect this also to give us meaning, purpose, the good.

Except that all of this is predicated upon a gross error, namely, that the true and the good coincide. If the truth is that existence is horrible, if the true is the furthest thing from the good, then at least since Socrates we have been involved in serious contradiction. In so far as we pursue the real truth, insofar as we approach the horror and meaninglessness of existence, we are not headed toward meaning, purpose, or the good at all. We progress toward meaninglessness. On the other hand, in so far as we seek meaning, purpose, and the good, we must mask the true, conceal it, create illusion. What emerges from this are two different conceptions of truth, the truth as correspondence to reality

and a truth which requires illusion, that is, merely, what *we take to be* true. We must recognize that Nietzsche has and needs both of these conceptions and that to understand him we must explore both.

### III

Some scholars, like Kaufmann, Wilcox, and Clark, think that for Nietzsche there are truths and that knowledge of them is both possible and desirable.<sup>36</sup> Other scholars like Danto and Green think that Nietzsche rejects the possibility of truth, but they and others also think that this gives rise to problems of self-contradiction.<sup>37</sup> Nehamas asks whether we are to understand Nietzsche as holding his positions to be true: "If he does, how can this possibly be consistent with his view that all views are only interpretations? If he does not—that is, if he does not think his views are true—why does he make the effort to present them in the first place?"<sup>38</sup> Others, like Schutte, simply think that Nietzsche is inconsistent. He "does not have a systematic theory of truth; if he did, he would be violating some of his major insights on the subject."<sup>39</sup>

If one thinks that Nietzsche believes in truth, one will have a natural tendency to gravitate toward those passages in Nietzsche's texts that endorse such a view, and there are plenty of such passages to be found. There will also be a natural tendency to want to downplay, subordinate, or interpret away those passages where Nietzsche rejects the possibility of truth, and there are plenty of these sorts of passages also. On the other hand, if one does not think that Nietzsche believes that truth is possible, one will tend to favor those texts where Nietzsche rejects truth, endorses perspectivism, and claims that all is interpretation. And one will tend to ignore or de-emphasize passages where Nietzsche makes truth claims.

In short, textual support can be found for two different positions here, but each is based on half the texts and does not really do justice to the other half. The position put forth in this article will try to do justice to both sets of texts, and do so without holding that Nietzsche is simply unsystematic and contradicts himself.

The argument will be that there *is* truth for Nietzsche. The truth is that existence is horrible and terrifying. Truth exists. But truth *must be avoided*—which is different from, despite the fact that it will often look the same as, claiming that truth simply does not exist. Truth not only *must* be avoided, but we have through long evolution actually learned to avoid it. We have interpreted, simplified, and falsified our world so as to make life possible. We have buried the truth under the sediment of millennia. Truth is possible—at least conceptually possible. We do not have to worry about self-contradiction. But truth is most difficult to get at and thus, *fortunately*, is unavailable to us. That, it will be argued, is Nietzsche's position.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche makes it quite clear that he believes in truth: "The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia's fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him."<sup>40</sup> In the *Genealogy of Morals*, he speaks of a will to truth, "the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*....After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing its *most striking inference*, its inference *against* itself..."<sup>41</sup> In the same text, he also speaks of "plain, harsh, ugly, repellant, unchristian, immoral truth.—For such truths do exist.—"<sup>42</sup>

Quite clearly, for Nietzsche, truth exists. What, then, is his response to this horrible truth? If we read carefully, we see that his response, time and again, is that *we must avoid* this truth. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he says: "The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he *had to* interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians....It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks *had to* create these gods..."<sup>43</sup> In the same text he also says that "Apollonian masks—are the *necessary* productions of a deep look into the horror of nature..."<sup>44</sup> In *Will to Power*, he says, "there is only *one* world, and this is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning....*We have need of lies* in order to conquer this reality, this 'truth,' that is, in order to *live*—That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence."<sup>45</sup>

Thus, truth exists, but we *must*, we *had* to, it was *necessary* to, avoid it. This 'must,' we should notice, is a very deep sort of 'must,' an evolutionary 'must.' We have learned over millennia and in myriad ways to hide the truth. Most people normally assume that biological as well as cultural evolution would tend to improve our ability to get at the truth, that is, that survival would depend on, and thus select for, an ability to know the truth. That, however, only makes sense in a world that fits us, where the true and the good coincide. The evolution of a species for whom existence is horrible would be quite different. Its evolution and development would depend upon an ability to conceal the truth. Truth is not necessary for our preservation, rather:

In order for a particular species to maintain itself and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it. The utility of preservation—not some abstract-theoretical need not to be deceived—stands as the motive behind the development of the organs of knowledge—they develop in such a way that their observations suffice for our preservation.<sup>46</sup>

As Nietzsche puts it in *The Gay Science*: "Innumerable beings who made inferences in a way different from ours perished; for all that, their ways might have been truer."<sup>47</sup> In the same text, he writes:

Over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species: those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny....it was only very late that truth emerged—as the weakest form of knowledge. It seemed that one was unable to live with it: our organism was prepared for the opposite; all its higher functions...worked with those basic errors which had been incorporated since time immemorial.<sup>48</sup>

In Nietzsche's view, knowing reduces, simplifies, and falsifies the world. In *Will to Power*, he says: "The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification—directed

not at knowledge but at taking possession of things...<sup>49</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says that we live in "simplification and falsification,"<sup>50</sup> and also:

Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is different and new in an impression....we make up the major part of the experience and can scarcely be forced *not* to contemplate some event as its "inventors." All this means: basically and from time immemorial we are—*accustomed to lying*. Or to put it more virtuously and hypocritically, in short, more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one knows.<sup>51</sup>

What clearly begins to emerge here is the second sense in which Nietzsche uses the term 'truth.' Besides *real truth*, the horror of existence, Nietzsche regularly talks about what we *take to be true*, truths we have *constructed*, truths whose function it is to mask the real truth—that is, illusions. For example, in *Will to Power*, he says, "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live."<sup>52</sup> In "On Truth and Lies," he says: "What then is truth?....Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins."<sup>53</sup> He also says, "life requires illusions, i.e. untruths which are taken to be truths."<sup>54</sup>

#### IV

As has already been said, scholars who think that for Nietzsche truth is both possible and desirable tend to downplay those passages where Nietzsche rejects the possibility of truth, and scholars who think that Nietzsche rejects the possibility of truth tend to downplay those passages where Nietzsche clearly holds that there is knowledge of the truth. No commentator makes consistent sense out of both sets of passages. The interpretation offered here does so. Nietzsche makes statements that clearly claim that there is truth and he makes statements that clearly claim that there is no truth. How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory claims? Truth exists. The truth is that

existence is horrible. We can know this truth, but it would likely mean our annihilation. Thus we must avoid it. Moreover, through millennia of evolution we have actually learned to avoid it. We have buried it and replaced it with what we *take to be* true, that is, with illusions. And thus all those texts which suggest that there is no truth make perfect sense. There is, in fact, no truth—it has been buried. The claim that there is no truth, here, is not a metaphysical or ontological claim. It is a social, cultural, or historical claim. We have buried the truth. We could with great effort dig back through millennia of sediment to find it. Ontologically or metaphysically truth is possible, but socially, culturally, and historically it does not exist.

Nor does Nietzsche have any problem with self-contradiction. As long as he admits that truth is possible, there is no contradiction at all in holding that we have buried it and live in illusion. There is no self-refutation here as there is supposed to be when one says, "nothing is true"—it is usually held that if that statement were true, then it would be false. It is not the case that Nietzsche rejects the concept of truth, and thus cannot legitimately employ the concept, such that one could embarrass him by asking whether his rejection of truth is to be taken as true. He accepts the possibility of truth and thus can with full legitimacy employ the concept. The concept is not lost to him. He just thinks we must and have avoided truth, buried it, and created illusions that make life possible.

Still, a very common objection to Nietzsche runs as follows. Nietzsche claims that all is perspective, interpretation, or illusion. What then of Nietzsche's own view that all is perspective, interpretation, or illusion? Is it itself also merely a perspective, interpretation, or illusion? If we answer yes, as Nietzsche seems to do at *Beyond Good and Evil* §22,<sup>55</sup> then, as Smith puts it, doesn't this leave Nietzsche's view "open to dismissal as merely another groundless perspective"?<sup>56</sup>

But how did we all of a sudden arrive at the notion that perspectives, interpretations, and illusions are to be *dismissed as groundless*? Nietzsche would not agree. Some perspectives are far more valuable than the truth. If the truth is horror, if we might perish from the truth, then we dismiss perspective, interpretation, and illusion at our own risk. If perspectives are more valuable than the truth, if they promote life, if they save us from the truth, they are certainly not to be dismissed.<sup>57</sup>

What must be dismissed is the notion that just because something is a perspective, interpretation, or illusion it is not to be taken seriously. It must be admitted, certainly, that such illusions are not true, but, then, their very function is to protect us from the truth. Thus, it would not seem that Nietzsche has any problem in admitting that his views are perspectives, interpretations, or illusions.

What about when Nietzsche makes such extreme claims as: "Nothing is true...",<sup>58</sup> "there is no truth...", or "Everything is false!"<sup>59</sup> Are not such claims self-refuting? Maybe not. In the first place, we have seen that for Nietzsche truth is theoretically possible. That means there can be some truths. Could these statements be among them? That depends on what these statements are taken to mean. They could mean that given millennia of evolution, given the need to avoid the horror of existence, the need to create illusions that make life possible, there is in fact no truth left to be found. Thus, all is false, nothing is true. These claims need not mean that it would be impossible to dig back to the truth. They need not mean that it is impossible to get at the truth. And thus they need not rule out our use of the concept. They can very well mean merely that truth has systematically been buried. And then perhaps we must just admit that these claims are rhetorically overstated a bit for dramatic effect. At any rate, it would seem that this is the way such statements must be read if we are also to take seriously other passages where Nietzsche clearly claims that truth is possible.

But still we have not yet fully come to terms with the issue here. How much truth can there be in the world—can there be *any* at all—if we are to meaningfully claim that *everything* is false? Indeed, Nietzsche speaks of a will to truth, which is something we find especially in modern science, and he thinks that science can get us all the way to the ultimate truth. It can eventually bring us face to face with the horror of existence and plunge us into nihilism. Moreover, before we reach that catastrophe, Nietzsche's view seems to be, science can also get us a good deal of ordinary truth.<sup>60</sup> How much truth can it give us? And how is such truth compatible with Nietzsche's claim that there is no truth?

Science can ultimately get us to real truth. It can get us to the horror of existence and plunge us into the void. But short of this horror, short of ultimate truth, what does science get us? Does

it, for example, continuously accumulate bits of *real* truth or merely what we *take to be* truth? If it only gets us the latter, what we *take to be* truth, that is, illusion, how could it ever through the accumulation of such illusions get us to the ultimate truth, the *real* truth—the horror of existence? On the other hand, if we admit that science does regularly accumulate *real* truth, then there would seem to be a *lot* of real truth floating around. If science has been accumulating a lot of real truth, this would seem to call in question statements like: "Nothing is true...", "there is no truth...", "Everything is false!" Must we then just accuse Nietzsche of using language too loosely in such passages and thus of contradicting his concept of science as an effective will to truth? Well, Nietzsche at least would not seem to think so. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says that the will to ignorance is not the opposite of the will to knowledge, *but its refinement*.<sup>61</sup> We must see that the sorts of truths generated by will to knowledge, will to truth, or science, while they may in one sense be *real* truths, are yet in another sense also deceptions, thus merely what we *take to be* truths, that is, illusions.

We seek the truth, we seek knowledge, we gather up as much scientific understanding as we can, we make continuous progress at this, and doing so will for us mask the ultimate horror and meaninglessness of the cosmos. This is to say that the accumulation of scientific truth, real truth, will deflect us from, prevent us from seeing, the horror, emptiness, and meaninglessness of existence—the ultimate truth. The scientific amassing of truth thus hides the truth. Truth conceals the truth—*truth*, don't we have to say it, *can lie*. There is a great deal of falsehood—simple and ordinary falsehood—that derives from the millennia of our avoiding the horror of existence. But there is even more falsehood in that truths—simple and ordinary truths, *real* truths—can also serve to mask the horror of existence, that is, mask the truth. Our *search* for truth is really a deep and complex way of *hiding* the truth. We could even say that rigorous, syllogistic, logical truth, insofar as it absorbs us, insofar as we find it impossible to doubt, insofar as we find it meaningful and significant, deflects us from the ultimate truth, the horror, emptiness, and meaninglessness of existence—it *deceives*. Thus, while we can say that, for Nietzsche, a great deal of truth may exist, nevertheless, there is also a falseness about

it. It functions to mask the ultimate truth. And so Nietzsche has not really contradicted his claim that "Nothing is true...", "there is no truth...", "Everything is false!" It is much like what Nietzsche says of Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy*. The reader who demands to know exactly what Sterne "really thinks of a thing, whether he is making a serious or a laughing face, must be given up for lost; for [Sterne] knows how to encompass both in a single facial expression; he likewise knows how, and even wants to be in the right and in the wrong at the same time..."<sup>62</sup>

Still, one might want to object to this, one might want to ask Nietzsche scholars, for example, whether they take their *own* explanations of Nietzsche's views on truth to be accurate, correct—that is, true? And they would no doubt have to admit that they do. One might then think that this would contradict the Nietzschean dictum that 'nothing is true.' That, however, would be a mistake. An accurate explanation of Nietzsche's views, as much as any other truth, is capable of deflecting us from the ultimate truth, the horror of existence, and thus of being a deception.

Generally speaking, then, truth is horrible and must be avoided. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it is conceptually possible and with great effort we could move toward it. Indeed, Nietzsche sees this as a test of our strength:

Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.<sup>63</sup>

Nietzsche also says, "Truth has had to be fought for every step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts, on which our love and our trust in life depend, has had to be sacrificed to it. Greatness of soul is needed for it..."<sup>64</sup> Thus, truth exists, but it is horrible and must be avoided. Indeed, for millennia we have been burying it. It would take great effort to get to it, and the test of

our strength is how much of the truth we can bear. It would be heroic to gain as much truth as we are able.<sup>65</sup>

Sophocles, too, thought the truth was horrible. For Jocasta it was something to be shunned. But Oedipus plows ahead and demands the truth. Truth is terrible, but nevertheless we want it, need it, demand it. To suffer under illusion is demeaning. To stand in the light of truth is a deep need. We cannot get all the way there, up outside the cave, but we want as much as we can bear. What then is the value of truth? It is horrible and terrible. It must be avoided. Yet it is a test of our strength—our greatness.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Audi, Christopher Kulp, and Calvin Stewart are to be thanked for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Various translations of Nietzsche have been used and, for the German, *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967ff.). The page of the translation will be cited but also the section so that any other editions, English or German, may easily be used. *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter *BT*), in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), §3, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *BT*, §3, p. 42. See also Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *Sophocles I*, tr. R. Fitzgerald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 134. Nietzsche also speaks of the "original Titanic divine order of terror" (*BT*, §3, p. 42) and of the "terrors of nature" (*BT*, §9, p. 67). He also speaks of the mere thought of pain as a "reproach against the whole of existence"; *The Gay Science* (hereafter *GS*), tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §48, p. 113. He speaks of Christianity as creating "sublime words and gestures to throw over a horrible reality"; see *The Will To Power* (hereafter *WP*), tr. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §685, p. 364. He also speaks of the world as "false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning" and of "the terrifying and questionable character of existence" (*WP*, §853, p. 451). See also *WP*, §4, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Genealogy of Morals* (hereafter *GM*), in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), III, §28, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> *GM*, III, §28, p. 162. See also *WP*, §55, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil* (hereafter *BGE*), tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), §39, p. 49. Also see *WP*, §822, p. 435.

<sup>7</sup> See L. Salomé, *Nietzsche*, tr. S. Mandel (Redding Ridge, CT: Black Swan Books, 1988), 10.

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche to Brandes on 10 April 1888, in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, tr. C. Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 294.

<sup>9</sup> *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. O. Levy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), VIII, "Epilogue," 79.

<sup>10</sup> The following show little or no awareness that the horror of existence is central to Nietzsche's thought. B. Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974). O. Schutte, *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). There are scholars who note the presence in Nietzsche's thought of the concept of the horror of existence, but for whom it does not in any significant way inform their interpretation. A.C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). R. Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), esp. 376, 478. A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Some scholars do appreciate the central importance of the concept of the horror of existence. J. Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). K. Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). D.R. Ahern, *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Nevertheless, this article hopes to show that even these scholars have not fully appreciated how deeply Nietzsche's thought has been affected by the horror of existence.

<sup>11</sup> *WP*, §12A, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> The three models presented here, that of the perfectible, the designed, and the horrific cosmos, should be compared to the three models that Nietzsche sets out in *BT*, §§18ff., pp. 109ff., that of the Socratic, the artistic, and the tragic. See also *WP*, §333, pp. 181-2.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *WP*, §§40, 90, 684, pp. 25, 55, 363.

<sup>14</sup> *BGE*, §225, also §44, pp. 153-4, 54-5. *WP*, §957, p. 502. *GM*, II, §7, pp. 67-8.

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<sup>15</sup> *BT*, §7, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> *BT*, §15, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> *BT*, §7, p. 60. Also see *Twilight of the Idols* (hereafter *TI*) in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), "Morality as Anti-Nature," §6, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (hereafter *T&L*), in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, tr. D. Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), §1, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> *BGE*, §39, p. 49. Also see *WP*, §822, p. 435.

<sup>20</sup> *TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy," §4, p. 37. Also see Plato, *Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 505a-505b, 508d-509b, 515c-516b.

<sup>21</sup> *TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §4, p. 31. See also *BT*, §14, p. 91; also §12, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, 1177<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, in *Sophocles I*, tr. D. Greene, 64, 69. Also, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> *Eudemian Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, II, 1216<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> *Republic*, 517b-c.

<sup>27</sup> *Republic*, 519d-e.

<sup>28</sup> *Oedipus the King*, 52, 57.

<sup>29</sup> On the influence of Lange on Nietzsche, see G.S. Stack, *Lange and Nietzsche* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> F.A. Lange, *The History of Materialism*, 3rd ed., tr. E.C. Thomas (New York: Humanities Press, 1950), First Book Continued, p. 121.

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<sup>31</sup> *History of Materialism*, Second Book Continued, pp. 284-5.

<sup>32</sup> *WP*, §822, p. 435.

<sup>33</sup> *Human, All Too Human, I* (hereafter *HAH, I*), tr. G. Handwerk, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. B. Magnus (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), III, §517, p. 269; also §36, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., *TI*, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth, pp. 40-1.

<sup>35</sup> *GM*, III, §24, p. 153.

<sup>36</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 357-60. J.T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), esp. 155-70. M. Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. M.S. Green, *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition* (Urbana; University of Illinois Press, 2002). See also S.D. Hales and R. Welshon, *Nietzsche's Perspectivism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 21-36.

<sup>38</sup> Nehamas, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Schutte, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Here, Golffing's translation is preferable; see *The Birth of Tragedy* [hereafter *BT* (Golffing)], in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. F. Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), §7, pp. 51-2. See also *BT*, §4, p. 46; also §17, p. 107. *HAH, I*, §225, p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> *GM*, III, §27, pp. 160-1.

<sup>42</sup> *GM*, I, §1, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> *BT*, §3, p. 42 (italics added). See also *BT*, §3, p. 43; also §4, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> Here again Golffing's translation is preferable, *BT* (Golffing), §9, pp. 59-60 (italics added). See also *Daybreak*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §507, p. 206. Also, *BGE*, §4, pp. 11-12; also §34, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> *WP*, §853, p. 451. Also *TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy," §5, p. 37-8.

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- <sup>46</sup> *WP*, §480, pp. 266-7. See also, *WP*, §513, p. 277.
- <sup>47</sup> *GS*, §111, p. 171. See also, *GS*, §307, pp. 245-6. Also, *HAH, I*, §§517, 519, pp. 269-70.
- <sup>48</sup> *GS*, §110, p. 169. See also, *GS*, §354, p. 299. Also, *T&L*, §1, pp. 79-81.
- <sup>49</sup> *WP*, §503, p. 274.
- <sup>50</sup> *BGE*, §24, p. 35. For an extended discussion of these matters, see Green, 58-94.
- <sup>51</sup> *BGE*, §192, p. 105. See also, *TI*, "The Four Great Errors," §5, p. 51.
- <sup>52</sup> *WP*, §493, p. 272. See also, *WP*, §535, p. 290.
- <sup>53</sup> *T&L*, §1, p. 84. See also, *BGE*, §296, p. 236.
- <sup>54</sup> "The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle Between Art and Knowledge," in *Philosophy and Truth*, §47, p. 16.
- <sup>55</sup> *BGE*, §22, pp. 30-1.
- <sup>56</sup> D. Smith, "Introduction" to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), xxii.
- <sup>57</sup> *BGE*, §§4, 34, pp. 11-2, 46. Also see Green, 150-65.
- <sup>58</sup> *GM*, III, §24, p. 150.
- <sup>59</sup> *WP*, §§13, 602, pp. 14, 326.
- <sup>60</sup> *GM*, III, §§24, 25, 27, pp. 150-4, 159-61.
- <sup>61</sup> *BGE*, §24, p. 35.
- <sup>62</sup> *Human, All too Human*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), II, §113, pp. 238-9.
- <sup>63</sup> *BGE*, §39, p. 49. See also, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, "Preface," §3, p. 218. Also, *WP*, §1041, p. 536.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Anti-Christ*, in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, §50, p. 167.
- <sup>65</sup> "The Philosopher," §73, p. 28.