

Nietzsche Guide

PHIL410

The Gay Science: §§ 1-4, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21, 26, 39, 57-59, 108-125, and Book V (§§343-349, 355, 371-374, 377, 381-383). I recommend also perusing the opening and closing sets of poems.

In General:

- Nietzsche believes that our *a priori* concepts are originally useful fictions. The perfection of geometry is not to be found in the empirical world's material objects, for instance. Straight lines, triangles, causality, the *a priori* itself, and thus the *a posteriori* as well, logic, thought, knowledge, science – all the icons of modern understanding are suspect, in his view, their origins of particular interest in our determining their status. It is not clear what these things are, what is their relation to reality. It is not clear what reality is. It is not clear what our relation is to reality. It is not clear what we are. Look for indications of this theme throughout the reading.
- The “gay science” is, in part, a reference to our efforts at knowledge and understanding taken under the above realization. Nietzsche will challenge us to avoid taking for granted any belief about ourselves and the world. See, e.g., §2. Even more than Kant, Nietzsche thinks that our forms of understanding constitute potentially insuperable obstacles to knowledge of Truth. See, e.g., §§344, 346, and esp. 374.
- A chief concern of Nietzsche's is morality, and while this is not our chief concern, his discussion of moral matters will be instructive of his view of knowledge and humanity, generally. Look for opportunities to extend his remarks in this context to epistemology, generally.
- There is a strong biological naturalism in Nietzsche's thought. He is above all impressed with the fact that we are evolved biological systems, and seeks to know how as such we could come to the understanding of the world that we have, and what are the possibilities for knowledge generally for creatures like us. In this connection, see, e.g., §57. See too his frequent references to truth, as a biological tool, as well as to untruth.
- The faith in rationalism implicit throughout the modern age is in Nietzsche's view laughable, if not monstrous. This is part of the significance of his pronouncement of God's death. See §§125 and 343, for example. The intellectual consequences of this realization are again the “gay science”, though it is a gaiety bordering on madness, for Nietzsche.
- While Nietzsche's style is epigrammatical, his writing is in fact carefully constructed and organized. Pay attention to the progression of thought from one section to the next. This is not to say that the organization has the geometrical or architectonical structure of a Spinoza or Kant. Again, Nietzsche's form here reflects his general conviction that while life and human reality lack rational

order, we can evidently know something about it. Our challenge is to say what, exactly, we can know, and how.

With the above in mind, try to answer these questions, as you read:

1. Why does Nietzsche write as he does? Whom is he speaking to? What views is he criticizing?
2. What is knowledge, for Nietzsche? What is it to know that $2 + 2 = 4$? What is it to know that I have ten toes? What is it to know that a straight line intersects a plane at a single point?
3. Given Nietzsche's criticism of knowledge and understanding, what should we make of his criticism of knowledge and understanding? Is that criticism true? Does he intend that we accept it as truth?
4. How do humans learn? How do they communicate with each other?
5. What is truth and what is it good for? What is untruth and what is it good for?
6. What does it mean to say that God is dead and that we have killed him? How would we come to know such a thing?
7. Is there a right way to do things, for Nietzsche? Is there a wrong way?
8. How do we determine that a thing is good or bad? What truth is revealed in such a determination?
9. To what extent is Nietzsche's thought indebted to Kant? Where does Nietzsche differ from Kant? From Hume? From Descartes? From Plato?
10. What is Nietzsche's view of science? What is it to participate in the "gay science"?