

Nietzsche III

PHIL410

Bodily interpretation

- Nietzsche is impressed with our passional nature, less so with our pretensions to logical realism. (See e.g. §57 where he likens us to artists in love, as compared with the relatively dispassionate fish.)
- Note, too, the extent to which we hide from ourselves our passional nature: we love the veil of Sais (§57), we find repulsive our biological functions, which give the lie to our idealist pretensions (§59). Compare the anxiety concerning a divine orderer produced by development of mechanical law (§59).
- In §355, Nietzsche characterizes human knowledge as nothing more than familiarity: those things we are familiar with we claim to know; those things that are unfamiliar, we know not. Note that we then claim to know anything to which we can apply a familiar scheme – such as the quantifiable or the logical. Yet these most familiar things resist our efforts to know them. The inner, *a priori* world least well known, perhaps. Note, too, the *instinct* for such knowledge: it derives from fear of the unknown (i.e., the unfamiliar).
- In §374, Nietzsche reflects on the *mediate* nature of human knowledge. His terms here are ‘interpretation’ and ‘perspective’. The human perspective is defined by human physiology. Our interpretation of the world within and without is thus one of indefinitely many possible accounts. The resulting “infinite” world he characterizes as “monstrous”, completely unfit for deification, praise, or admiration.
- Our biological status, then, deprives us of any independent ground or tool from which to perceive in-itself reality. Rather, Nietzsche suggests, we instinctively adapt ourselves physically to our surroundings, mimicking the familiar tropes of inner and outer world. Like Roald Dahl’s *vermicious knids*, that is, we embody words, concepts, themselves nothing more than impressions or shapes we assimilate. But they are dumb, meaningless, not to mention imperfect, inaccurate. Truth, for Nietzsche, is this realization. (But such truth must be itself vexed, given the nature of human understanding. See below.)
- Knowledge, then, is problematic for Nietzsche for two reasons:
 - o First, our *a priori* concepts are *errors*. They amount to oversimplifications of reality.
 - o Second, our means of representation are *opaque*: at best we *simulate* reality; the terms of our discourse are never transparent with respect to reality.

Connections

- to Plato
 - o Plato is the great idealist: reality consists in the abstract, immaterial, and unchanging.
 - o Precisely this “reality” Nietzsche rejects as false, a fantasy, a useful error, a wishful dream.

- Note that the epistemological role of the Forms is essentially that described by Nietzsche: we use these concepts to order and organize our world. But note too that Nietzsche will endorse the “deficiency” of (little-f) forms: nothing in experience conforms to Plato’s idealized reality.
- Note too Plato’s evident horror at the world of flux – we might wish for an ideal, perfect realm, one we might “join” after the hurly-burly of material existence; but this is *nihilism*: the desire to negate and escape the only real world.
- to Descartes and Hume
 - Descartes is convinced of the Transcendental Reality of our metaphysical concepts. Likewise, he believes that we have direct and transparent access to our internal nature. Further, he is a *dualist* like Plato: there is an immaterial realm housing the eternal soul, and there is a physical world containing our bodies.
 - Nietzsche rejects all these claims because (a) there is no perfect application of ideal concepts to the physical world, because (b) there is a better explanation for such concepts (i.e., that they are abstractions), and (c) because of the representational opacity with which we face any reality distinct from representation.
 - Note that, like Plato, Descartes is aware of the inaccuracy and impenetrability of sense. But for Nietzsche, this is our only access to “reality”.
 - Hume maintains that we cannot obtain the metaphysical concepts we think we have. This is consistent with Nietzsche’s view that nothing in sense answers strictly to such concepts.
 - On the other hand, where Hume seems sanguine concerning the *potential* for such a thought-reality correspondence, Nietzsche rejects it as practically impossible. That is, Hume does not deny that such concepts could transparently represent reality, he simply denies that we have them. Nietzsche, by contrast, rejects the possibility of transparent representation, owing to the differences in media: biological goo, on our end; something distinct on the other.
 - Nietzsche would evidently reject Hume’s dictum that ideas can exist only where there exists a correlative impression. He seems to suggest that metaphysical concepts could develop in us by evolutionary accident. In this respect, Nietzsche is closer to Kant and Descartes, who accept the possibility of *a priori* concepts.
- to Kant
 - Nietzsche’s debt to Kant is considerable. Kant develops the constructivist epistemology with which Nietzsche begins. Human experience, for both, is a product of sense “data”, plus the forms of intuition and conception.
 - Further, Kant’s constructivism leaves open the door for other forms of experience by other sentient creatures. This notion Nietzsche develops in §374, e.g., where indefinitely many “realities” are possible.
 - However, where Kant appears to preserve some of the idealist thinking of Descartes and Plato, Nietzsche sees only the arbitrariness and disorder of

biological life. Kant seems to view humanity as uniform, both over time and at a given time. Necessity for Kant (for humans), is absolute and eternal. For Nietzsche, by contrast, it evolves and may well vary by person or community (especially where morality is concerned; see below).

- Moreover, where Kant asserts the conformity of experience to the Categories, Nietzsche raises questions, a la Hume, as to whether we experience precisely what our *a priori* concepts imply.
- Nietzsche also picks up Kant's "Copernican Revolution," but with a more biological spin: where Kant recognizes the need to "dictate" to nature our own terms of rationality in order to understand it, Nietzsche sees this as our species' means of environmental control. For Kant, science is the result; for Nietzsche, life.
- Also, note that Kant differs from Plato in separating human morality from the human-independent realm of Forms: human morality is particular to the individual's free will, rather than imposed from without. Nietzsche, too, rejects objective moral laws (see Death of God), but does Kant one better: where Kant's moral laws must be rational for all, Nietzsche is again inclined to a more localized necessity: taste and style will determine the rules under which an individual is willing to live. Note again Nietzsche's determination to construe the rational in biological terms; Kant regards the rational as our means of escape from the animal.

How is "truth" possible?

- According to Nietzsche, truth consists in a more accurate assessment of the relationship between human thought and reality. At the same time, Nietzsche maintains that human understanding is at best an *approximation* of reality in *opaque* terms. Are these two claims consistent?
- That is, if human understanding inevitably misrepresents reality, what are we to say of this misrepresentation claim? Is it, too, a misrepresentation?
- The question concerns the status of the assessment of human knowledge as *untruth*. Is it true that human knowledge is untrue?
 - Consider an identity judgment P , say about an apparently persisting object: $a = b$. Nietzsche maintains that such judgments are "errors": in fact, $a \neq b$. Call this claim (that P -type judgments are errors) Φ .
 - Now, what is the status of Φ ? In particular, is it true? Is it an accurate representation of reality?
 - If F makes use of *a priori* concepts, then it is an oversimplification. And if F is a representation in terms distinct from the reality it depicts, then those terms must be opaque with respect to that reality.
- Where the opacity question is concerned, Nietzsche might plead that the terms in the two cases are the same. After all, this is a claim about the nature of claims, in effect.
- Where the oversimplification question is concerned, Nietzsche might be in more serious difficulty, since he asserts that no two things are in fact identical. (Does he in fact assert this about all things? He asserts it about things encountered in sense.)