1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, David I., Truth, truthfulness and philosophy in Plato and Nietzsche 2007, 339-360.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/465>

TRUTH, TRUTHFULNESS AND PHILOSOPHY IN PLATO AND NIETZSCHE

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British Journal for the History of Philosophy, 15 (2) 2007, 339 - 360

I

Plato and Nietzsche tend to be presented as the poles of the narrative of Western philosophy: while Plato scripted the beginning of the epoch of absolute truth and value, Nietzsche announced its collapse. However, any serious reading of each makes it clear that this dichotomy is merely a convenient fiction. On the one hand, Nietzsche's vehement response to Plato is both ambivalent (regarding the most beautiful, but diseased flower of antiquity (BGE, Pref.))¹ and nuanced. On the other hand, we need to see past what became Plato's legacy, and allow for a more broadly-focused (perhaps in part oneirocritical) reading of a philosophical dramatist, mythologist and ironist. One of my goals is to weaken the sense of opposition.

I will not discuss 'Nietzsche on Plato'.² I want instead to explore the consequences of comparing their approaches to the questions of truth and

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- 1 In-text references to Nietzsche's works will adopt the following abbreviations: *The Gay Science*, translated by J. Nauckhoff (Cambridge, 2001 [1887]); *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by W. Kaufmann (New York, 1966 [1886]) – BGE; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967 [1887]) – GM; *The Will to Power*, translated by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967 [1883-8]) – WP; *The Antichrist*, translated by W. Kaufmann (New York, 1954 [1888]) – A. Numbers are section/paragraph numbers.
 - 2 On this, see, for example, A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass, 1985): Chs 6 and 7; S. Rosen, 'Remarks on Nietzsche's Platonism', in T. Darby, B. Egged and B. Jones (eds.) *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation Language and Politics* (Don Mills, 1989): 145-164; C. Baracchi, 'Plato's Shadows at Noon: Nietzsche and the Platonic Texts', *Research in Phenomenology* 25 (1995): 90-117; and D. F. Krell, 'Reading Plato

truthfulness. I claim that there are some striking parallels in this regard, and that their approach to truth and truthfulness, as I understand it, implies a shared, and equally striking, perspective on the nature of philosophy and its possibilities.

Focusing mainly on the Republic and Nietzsche's 'perspectivist'³ writings, I claim that both Plato and Nietzsche view worldly truth and truthfulness *ethically*. That is, they view the measure and value of truth and truthfulness as a matter of the contribution truthfulness and our truth judgements make to health and life – and in that sense, as ethical. Some may find it reasonably obvious to say this of Nietzsche. It is less obvious to say it of Plato, unless we acknowledge the complexity and qualification with which his absolutism is presented to us. I will argue that, for both philosophers, this health can be maintained only by retaining an acceptance of the absolute value of truth, while *also* being truthful regarding the impossibility and threat of the absolute. This is an impossibility determined by our finitude and our corporeality, and a threat brought about by the distance of the absolute from life. We find, therefore, that for both Nietzsche and Plato health depends on the maintenance of a tension. However, this is a tension that is itself, for any subject, impossible and the guarantee of disease.

Nietzsche and Plato purport to resolve the paradox implied by this necessary tension, but they do so ironically, by positing characters (the new philosopher, and the Philosopher-King) who supposedly have natures that can sustain the tension. These resolutions need to be understood as ironic because in each case the posited character, in which the tension is maintained in a unity, is a human impossibility. The

(After Nietzsche & Co.), *Research in Phenomenology*, 25 (1995): 45-67. In Krell, see pp. 48–56 for Nietzsche's critique of Plato, and pp. 55–62 for a model of a Nietzschean reading of Plato.

3 That is, I do not feel that Nietzsche's early work, such as *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, provides a useful starting point. In my view, the early position involves essentialism, representationalism, and a strong correspondence theory of truth, none of which can justifiably be found in the 'mature' position that evolved from *Human, All Too Human* onwards. An interpretation that attempts to generate a unified position based on the early work does Nietzsche no credit and leaves him stranded as a romantic, inclined to escape the implausible features of his (ultimately, traditional metaphysical) position by appeal to voluntarism and subjective idealism. For interpretations of the early views for which I have sympathy see M. Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1990): Ch. 3, M. T. Conard, 'Overcoming Dualism: A Critique of Some Recent Interpretations of Nietzschean Perspectivism', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1994): 251-269, and B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, 2002): 16-18. Having said this, I should add that a more extensive discussion of the issues raised in this paper would naturally deal with many more parts of Nietzsche's and Plato's work than I am able to engage with here.

resolutions are thus of no use to us, in the sense that they do not provide us with a new way of thinking – a serious model of an overcoming subjectivity.

Given that we interpret the resolutions as ironic, we need then to interpret the trope. What point, in each case, was being made by these play-acting resolutions?

I think that they are designed to show how the tension generates a dialectic, which was, for both Nietzsche and Plato, their image of philosophy as a process without a subject. These two philosophers of the over-man resolve philosophy's underlying paradox by offering it to no man.

My account depends on three interpretive claims. First, in Section II, I claim that Plato has distinct approaches to absolute truth (that truth that resides in the forms) on the one hand, and worldly, or phenomenal truth on the other. The central part of this claim lies in the interpretation of Plato's distinction, in the *Republic*, between true and verbal falsehoods. Second, in Section III, I draw attention to Nietzsche's complex response to absolutism, which involves both a robust dismissal of the claims of absolutism and an assertion of the ambiguous necessity of the will to truth that drives these claims. The crucial point here is my account of the nature of Nietzsche's perspectivism and his so-called return to philology. Finally, in Section IV I argue that the solutions offered by Plato and Nietzsche to the paradoxes generated by their respective approaches are each impossible and unbelievable, and I suggest that we should reasonably expect that Plato and Nietzsche would each agree with that assessment.⁴

Thus, in exploring this interpretation, we are in part re-evaluating the contrast between Plato and Nietzsche. But through this re-evaluation we are also, and ultimately more significantly, re-considering the relation between philosophy and truth, and re-construing the relation between the philosopher and philosophy. I am suggesting that in these philosophers we find an approach to truth and philosophy quite different to that which has been imagined, and quite different from that of the tradition they have become seen to bracket. I hope it will become clear that I do not claim to discover a nihilism regarding truth and the project of philosophy. Nihilism

here (in Nietzsche's terms, passive nihilism), would amount to the conclusion that since absolutism is impossible, then a concern for truth and truthfulness is nugatory, and philosophy itself is impossible and misguided. Instead, by thinking of philosophy as a process without a subject, we find the tools for retaining a concern for truth and truthfulness in spite of the paradoxical nature of the philosophical project.

II

The *Republic* is concerned with the nature of justice, and also (with qualification) with the possibility of its realization in a city. The discussion in which I am interested begins towards the end of Book 2.⁵

In Book 2, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus take on the task of showing that justice is good 'both because of itself and because of what comes of it' (358a). Socrates starts with the methodological move of changing the focus from justice in an individual to the 'larger surface' of justice in a theoretical city (368c–369a).⁶ This city is built up according to the needs of people, on the principle of each playing that role to which he or she is best suited. When the account moves on to the requirements of a luxurious city (from 372d), two crucial elements enter the considerations: guardian warriors are required because of the natural tendency of desire to lead to war (373e–374e); and these guardians will have to be well-educated so that they are best able to protect the city (from 376c).

Before they are given physical training, those children with appropriate natures (376b–c) are to be taught poetry and music, which includes telling them stories. Because the young and tender are malleable and impressionable (377a), it is necessary for those who are creating this theoretical city to supervise the storytellers,

4 On all three counts, my interpretations conflict with some of the more standard approaches. Due to limitations of space, I address some, but not all of the alternative readings.

5 I am citing the following editions: Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997), Plato, *Republic*, translated by G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997), Plato, *Symposium*, translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997).

6 In the context of the 'state of nature' aspect of this move, see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*: Ch. 2 & 3.

selecting only 'fine and beautiful' stories for them (377b–c), and establishing patterns for poets to follow in the future (378e–379a). In the discussion that follows, the truth or falsity of these stories keeps arising as an issue. However, it is blended with the question of the effect of the stories on the young; and while the truth of the stories is overriding, it is so in a complex way.

Homer, Hesiod and other major poets are condemned for composing false stories, 'especially if the falsehood isn't well told' (377d), which is when the story gives a bad (inaccurate) image of the gods and heroes. In explanation, Socrates says that 'telling the greatest falsehood about the most important things doesn't make a fine story' (377e), and gives as an example Hesiod's account of Ouranos, Cronos and Zeus, and the castration, cannibalism and patricide involved there. He says, 'even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people' (378a).

Socrates and Adeimantus agree that if the guardians are to think 'that it's shameful to be easily provoked into hating one another', and that 'no citizen has ever hated another and that it's impious to do so', then they must not hear such stories when young, even if the stories are allegorical (378b–d). For the young 'can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable' (378d).

With this in mind, the general principle for poets to follow is that 'a god must always be represented as he is' (379a). This leads to two patterns or 'laws'. First, given the principle that a god is good (379b) it follows that 'a god isn't the cause of all things but only of good ones' (380c). Stories that go against this pattern 'are not pious, not advantageous to us, and not consistent with one another' (380c).

This comment captures nicely the complexity of the criteria that are applied throughout this discussion. On the one hand, we see a continual shift of criteria, between the truth, the piety, and the effect of the stories. On the other hand, however, the use of different criteria is not flagged as notable. They seem to be equally relevant, or to be treated (with neither hesitation nor explicit justification) as somehow interrelated.

The second pattern or law is that a god is simple, unable 'to appear in different forms at different times, sometimes changing himself from his own form into many shapes, sometimes deceiving us by making us think that he has done it' (380c–d). The explanation of the second pattern, involves the central discussion of truth and truthfulness in the *Republic*. The argument begins with the following steps:

The best things are least liable to alteration or change, and the most courageous and most rational soul is least disturbed or altered by any outside affection; so a god, as the best thing in every way, would be least likely to be changed. If a god did change himself, it would have to be into something worse and more ugly, and no one, god or human, would do this deliberately (380e–381c). It follows that stories representing the gods as taking on different shapes should not be told, and not used, for example, as a way of controlling children by terrifying them. 'Such stories blaspheme the gods and, at the same time, make children more cowardly' (381e). Again, we have the pairing of truth and utility. Note also how the truthfulness of these stories is judged. The poets aren't quite condemned for misrepresenting the mythical past; they are condemned for representing the gods impiously, and creating false stories in *that* sense: saying things of the gods that shouldn't be true given considerations of piety, given a priori principles of godliness.

Nor, however, should the gods be represented as deceiving humans into believing that they appear in different ways. First, a brief sketch of the argument: While no one will accept a 'true falsehood', humans find 'verbal falsehood' useful and not hateful; gods, however, have no need of such falsehoods, and are thus 'in every way free from falsehood' (382e), and should not be represented as deceiving others.

In the argument against the gods being deceivers, Socrates asks whether a god would be willing to be false, either in word or in deed, by presenting an illusion; Adeimantus is unsure; and Socrates responds,

Don't you know that a *true* falsehood, if one may call it that, is hated by all gods and humans? ...

... no one is willing to tell falsehoods to the most important part of himself about the most important things, but of all places he is most afraid to have falsehood there. ...

... to be false to one's soul about the things that are, to be ignorant and to have and hold falsehood there, is what everyone would least of all accept, for everyone hates a falsehood in that place most of all. (382a–b)

This sets up a distinction between true falsehood and verbal falsehood, or a 'falsehood in words.' True falsehood, also defined as 'ignorance in the soul of someone who has been told a falsehood' (382b), is hated by all, but verbal falsehood is sometimes useful 'and so not deserving of hatred' (382c). A verbal falsehood is described as 'a kind of imitation of this affection in the soul [i.e., of true falsehood], an image of it that comes into being after it and is not a pure falsehood' (382b). Socrates then gives examples of ways in which a verbal falsehood can be useful.

Isn't it useful against one's enemies? And when any of our so-called friends are attempting, through madness or ignorance, to do something bad, isn't it a useful drug for preventing them? It is also useful in the case of those stories we were just talking about, the ones we tell because we don't know the truth about those ancient events involving the gods. By making a falsehood as much like the truth as we can, don't we also make it useful? (382c–d).

This distinction is obscure. Commentators tend either to pass over it, or to gloss it in the light of some general interpretive commitment, without, in my view, ever really making sense of the passage. Let us, then, try to tease out the distinction.

Falsehood regarding the 'things that are', told (possibly by oneself) to, and held in, the most important part of oneself, or one's soul, seems to be falsehood regarding the Forms told to one's reason. A verbal falsehood is a kind of imitation of this.

Perhaps, then, while in true falsehood one comes to have false beliefs about what is ultimately the case (what is real), in a verbal falsehood one *pretends* to have such beliefs. This fits with the flow of the argument, for the discussion occurs in the context of the question of gods deceiving humans into thinking that they (the gods) are other than they are. We already know that the gods are what they are and do not change. Might they, nevertheless, deceive us into believing that they are otherwise?

Yet, this cannot be correct. For the verbal falsehoods that are listed are not plausibly read as pretended falsehoods about the most important things. If I say to my enemy that I do not intend to attack, and if this is intentionally false, I am not pretending to believe something about the most important things. I am merely pretending that my aims are peaceful.

If we focus instead on a verbal falsehood being not a *pure* falsehood, this suggests that a verbal falsehood is something like a watered-down or faded copy of a true falsehood, without being *about* the most important things. Now it might seem

that an unavoidably false story about the gods *is* a falsehood about the most important things. However, the stories that Socrates condemns in these terms (at 377d–e) are those stories that represent the gods impiously. Therefore, to speak impiously of the gods is to utter falsehoods about the most important things. But in the current case (the acceptable useful verbal falsehoods), we know that the story is false (we know we lack the historical knowledge), but we make it ‘as much like the truth as possible’ by making it accord with the dictates of piety.

Thus, a verbal falsehood is something like a faded copy of a true falsehood. A verbal falsehood misrepresents only unimportant things (unimportant in the scheme of Platonic things), and once we are in the realm of unimportant things there seem to be no moral factors that might outweigh the question of utility – until, that is, we begin looking at the city as an imitation of the Good. We will get to this in a moment.

The list of ways in which a verbal falsehood can be useful is illuminating in two further respects. First, the final sentence reinforces the point made earlier about the interrelationship between usefulness and truth. We make a falsehood (a story about the gods) useful *by* making it as much like the truth as possible, and we do this by obeying the dictates of piety and the principles regarding the composition and selection of stories. Second, the list leads us into the question of ‘lies’ in the *Republic*.

It is a commonplace to represent a verbal falsehood simply as a lie.⁷ Moreover, it is true that at least most of the *acts involved*, in the various verbal falsehoods mentioned in the *Republic* may be recognizable as lies. Some hesitation is, however, appropriate. For example, it is not obvious that the pious yet historically ill-informed stories are lies, since it would be peculiar to regard telling myths to children as lying. There might be an accompanying act that is a lie (if we said: and this is a true story), but that is not part of the act that is described in the *Republic*. Nor is it obvious that the myth of the metals (414b–416c), as it is presented, is a lie. However, aside from this qualification, a more important issue arises here.

7 See, for example, T. C. Brickhouse, and N. D. Smith, ‘Justice and Dishonesty in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 21 (1983): 79-95; C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Arguments of Plato’s Republic* (Princeton, 1988): Ch. 4; and C. Page, ‘The Truth about Lies in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Ancient Philosophy*, 11 (1991): 1-33.

It does seem clear that Plato thinks that all the verbal falsehoods are examples of the same thing, and interpreters tend to think that what links them is the fact that they are, for Plato, examples of lies.⁸ But we need to consider more carefully what the relevant feature is, and we need to note the crucial fact that even if one was confident that these acts are all appropriately classified as lies, they are not discussed as lies, in terms appropriate for lies.

A lie is a direct or indirect assertion produced with the intention of deceiving another by way of invoking and betraying that other's trust in the truthfulness of the assertion. That is, the liar intends to be understood as believing some fact, and the liar intends this to be mutually recognized. These two conditions constitute the act as an assertion and coincide with the invocation of trust. Furthermore, the liar intends the invoked trust (in the genuineness of the representation of belief) to be a vehicle for the 'liee's' deception (coming to believe what is, by the liar's lights, false). The invocation of trust distinguishes lying from mere deception, both as an act, and as a moral phenomenon. The betrayal of trust in a lie makes it *pro tanto* objectionable, and any justification of lying needs to find a way to override this feature.⁹

The central terms in this account of lying have no place in Plato's discussion of verbal falsehoods. In the *Republic*, verbal falsehoods are evaluated in terms of their effects, and this evaluation is not presented as a question of whether the outcome does or does not override some underlying moral concern, not even a *prima facie* concern.

8 The rulers' falsehoods are (1) the control of children's stories (the 'educative lies') (378b–d), (2) the verbal falsehoods (the 'medicinal lies') (382a–e), (2) the myth of the metals, (the 'noble lie') (414b–460c), and the rigged sexual lottery to control breeding (459d–460c). (To this last we might add the hiding from mothers of the identity of their biological children, at 460c–d.) That they are grouped as relevantly similar can be traced as follows: see 382d1–4 for a reference from the medicinal lies back to the educative lies; see 414c1–2 for a reference from the noble lie back to the medicinal lies; see 459c7–d1 for a reference from the breeding lottery back to the medicinal lies. Most commentators accept this grouping, and as a grouping of what are, and are regarded by Plato as, lies. Brickhouse and Smith ('Justice and Dishonesty in Plato's *Republic*': 82–4) are unusual in thinking that the noble lie should be set aside, as an 'educative myth'. They do not, however, make anything of the dissonance between this suggestion and Plato's view of its relation to the other 'lies'.

9 I leave out consideration of what counts as success – is it that the liar have the appropriate intentions?; is it that the liee recognize the intention to assert?; or is it that deception is brought about by the satisfaction of the liar's lying intentions? – and other matters of detail. For discussion of some of these issues, and details, see my 'Lying, Liars and Language', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (1992): 623–640.

We have seen that falsehoods to one's enemies and so on, at 382c–d, are acceptable merely by virtue of their being useful to mortals. By Book 3, however, such 'lies' are restricted to the rulers. If falsehoods are useful as a form of drug, then only these courageous doctors must use them – at least in the public sphere – for the good of the city, because of the actions of either enemies or citizens.

But everyone else must keep away from them, because for a private citizen to lie to a ruler is just as bad a mistake as for a sick person or athlete not to tell the truth to his doctor or trainer about his physical condition or for a sailor not to tell the captain the facts about his own condition or that of the ship and the rest of its crew – indeed it is a worse mistake than either of these. (389b–c)

The problem (the 'mistake') is not that the uttering of a falsehood is a betrayal of the trust of the ruler, doctor, trainer or captain; still less that it involves treating the other as a means. In fact, no moral dimension enters the discussion, and interpersonalism is relevant only in as much as the ruler, trainer, or whoever, is deceived. The problem is that telling the falsehood introduces to the city 'something as subversive and destructive to a city as it would be to a ship' (389d). The falsehood makes the ruler ignorant of the true state of the city, and might lead to the disruption of the appropriate ordering of the city. This approach is consistent throughout this discussion in the *Republic*. The admissibility of verbal falsehoods is decided by consideration of the effect of the falsehood. Falsehood is liable to be harmful if it deceives the rulers about the true state of the city, and if the administering (that is, deceiving) doctor is not appropriately capable.¹⁰

I suggest that we can begin to understand this aspect of the *Republic* if we adopt a distinction between morality and ethics. For the evaluation of verbal falsehoods seems to have an ethical framework, in as much as it is guided by the conditions of living well, but it seems not to have a moral framework.

10 Thus, I disagree with Reeve (*Philosopher-Kings*: 209–210). He claims that the problem with lies by non-rulers is that because they do not know the Good itself their lies might be real, and so might lead the rulers and the city away from the Good. Yet Plato explicitly focuses on the damage done by such falsehoods misleading the rulers, and does not raise the question of their being accidental true falsehoods. Furthermore, at this stage of the *Republic* the rulers are not philosophers who know the Good.

True falsehoods, falsehoods about the Forms held in the reasoning part of one's soul, are evaluatively significant in a different way from verbal falsehoods. They are ruled out from the start, for it is regarded as obvious that no one would choose to have false beliefs about the Forms, about what is real. This, I suggest, presents the issue as a moral matter, because the rejection of such falsehood, regarded as obvious, is raised in terms of what one would find unacceptable in principle. We are asked whether someone would find it acceptable to tell falsehoods about the most important things to the most important part of oneself, or to be false to one's soul. Furthermore, the obviousness of the response to the question seems to derive from the intrinsic value of the Good, and the intrinsic value of one's relation to the Good.¹¹

Truth, therefore, seems to be divided into two types, corresponding to two realms. On the one hand, there is that truth which resides in the reality of the Forms; on the other hand, there is that truth which pertains to our representation of appearances.

This division has some affinities with Vlastos's¹² distinction between evaluative and sentential truth, but his terms are not the best way of establishing the distinction in this case. The crucial issue is not so much that evaluative truth applies to nonlinguistic objects (and Socrates does speak of truths told to our souls). The crucial issue is that our relation to the Forms is intellectual rather than sensual, and that, because the Forms are identical with the Good and appearances are at best an imitation of Forms, the value of that truth which relates to the Forms is absolute, while the value of the truth of appearances is conditional. The value of the truths regarding appearances is conditional on their contribution to our wellbeing and our imitative projects.

In the *Republic* there *is* a special link between verbal falsehoods and true falsehoods: we consider the good of the city in relation to the Good. We ask, is this

11 It might seem odd to speak of telling falsehoods to one's self. I take it that this claim preempts (albeit with insufficient clarity) the tripartite division of the soul, so that one's reasoning part is told a falsehood by one's spirited or appetitive parts. This is the non-'Socratic' divided self, which makes *akrasia* possible.

12 G. Vlastos, 'Degrees of Reality in Plato', in G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1983 [1965]): 58-75.

falsehood necessary and useful for the task of making the city as perfect an imitation of the Form of Justice as possible? While this does not touch on moral questions of interpersonalit in the sense which must be immediate in any evaluation of lying understood in the way I have described it above, falsehoods in the city do have an added evaluative intensity, we might say, because this is a city that is to be the best possible imitation of the Good, an imitation brought about by artist–rulers. This factor introduces an ‘importance’ to the use of verbal falsehoods, and makes an indirect link to the evaluation of true falsehoods. It does so because of the extraordinary task that the *Republic* sets itself: to bring the absolute to bear in the phenomenal world. I will return to this in Section IV .

III

In recent discussion of Nietzsche’s view of truth, two broad versions appear. On the one hand we are offered Nietzsche as a pragmatist who challenges any conception of truth that gives it absolute or intrinsic value. The alternative views claim to find in Nietzsche a defence of the intrinsic value of truth, albeit one that avoids the traditional absolutist pitfalls. This might be seen as the difference between ‘postmodern’ and ‘analytic’ versions of Nietzsche; or the difference could be found in the contrast between the accounts of Nietzsche offered by Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams.¹³

Nietzsche, in his later work, denies that truth is an object, or a property of sentences; instead, truth is to be understood as a practice, or (better) a process, of affirmation, or holding true. He denies the possibility of statements that capture a universal and objective relation between a ‘selfless’ subject and an independently existing state of affairs, claiming instead that our epistemic position is intrinsically perspectival. At one point in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche says:

‘Truth’ is ... not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something *that must be created* and that gives a name to a *process*, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining – not a becoming-conscious of

13 For Rorty, see the essays in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), but also Vol. 2 and 3, and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). For Williams, see *Truth and Truthfulness*.

something [that] is 'in itself' firm and determined. It is a word for the 'will to power.' (WP, §552)

The idea that truth is 'something there' (a distinct fact of the matter) is one aspect of the ascetic ideal. It is accompanied by the idea that we can in principle adopt the position of a 'selfless', unconditioned subjectivity taking a position regarding this reality. Nietzsche sees these as permeating all Western philosophy, having their origin in Plato's equation of the True, the Good, and Being. Instead, he suggests, there is only appearance, tied intimately to conditioned subjectivity.

Although Nietzsche is clear in the later work that he thinks that the idea of a world in itself is a contradiction in terms (BGE, §16) he offers little direct explicit argument for this claim. Instead, the world in itself is rejected by way of a denial of the possibility of a subjectivity that could take a position regarding such a world. With this denial in place, continued invocation of the world in itself is either an idle hypothesis or a matter of clinging surreptitiously to old ideals.

Against the idea of a selfless subject, Nietzsche argues that truth claims are ineradicably conditioned: by our physiological limitations and the selective apprehension of the world which derives from that; by our inherited values and presuppositions born by language, culture, and morality; and by our instinctual drives and needs.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, he warns us against the conceptual fiction 'that posited a pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject.' He says that concepts such as this,

... always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking (GM, Bk. 3, §12)

The interpreting forces, these values, presuppositions and needs, cannot be eliminated, since they constitute the very possibility of the subject in the first place – strip the ego of its affects and there is nothing. Given this, the idea of an independent reality drops out as well. If the formation of a view of the world is necessarily conditioned, then it is vacuous to posit a world (implicitly, of course, a view of the world) which is unconditioned – as if, Nietzsche says, 'world would remain over after one deducted the perspective!' (WP, §567).

So we have a denial of the relation between subject and object that might ground absolutism. There is no selfless subject; there is no independently existing reality; the appearance of a relation is simply the outcome of the process of assigning truth. This amounts to the thesis of perspectivism, the claim that 'there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing"' (GM, Bk. 2, §12).

The interpretation that sees Nietzsche as a type of pragmatist focuses on the relation between this critique of absolutism and his critique of a prudential justification of truthfulness. For if truth is not justified metaphysically, then the question of the value of truth forces itself upon us. In the Book of *The Genealogy of Morals* devoted to the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche comments that all philosophers are oblivious 'of how much the will to truth itself first requires justification.' He says that this has been because philosophy has been dominated by the ascetic ideal, 'because truth was posited as being, as God, as the highest court of appeal – because truth was not *permitted* to be a problem at all.' He goes on,

From the moment faith in the God of the ascetic ideal is denied, a *new problem arises*: that of the *value* of truth.

The will to truth requires a critique – let us thus define our own task – the value of truth must for once be experimentally *called into question*. (GM, Bk. 3, §24)

The critique of the will to truth, the calling into question of the value of truth, involves the arising of a new self-consciousness, in which 'the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*' (GM, Bk. 3, §27).

It might seem that this questioning recommends a pragmatic attitude to truth. If our truth-making is an expression of the will to truth, which is itself a servant of the will to power, then in questioning the will to truth we question the extent to which instances of truth-making truly serve the will to power.

However, while there is clearly a pragmatic or ethical dimension to this questioning, Nietzsche is questioning the will to truth itself, the ascetic ideal, in the light of the fact that certain of our truths are a danger to us. In *The Gay Science*, for example, Nietzsche considers the faith that underlies science (understood broadly): "'Nothing is *more* necessary than truth; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value'" (GS 344). He asks whether this expresses a will not to deceive, or a will not to let oneself be deceived

But why not deceive? Why not allow oneself to be deceived? Note that the reasons for the former lie in a completely different area from those for the latter (GS 344)

The will to truth as a will not to be deceived takes science as pragmatically motivated, 'a long-range prudence'; but Nietzsche questions the judgement here: 'What do you know in advance about the character of existence to be able to decide whether the greater advantage is on the side of the unconditionally distrustful or of the unconditionally trustful?' That is, prudence itself cannot lead us to value truth unconditionally, so prudence cannot be the origin of science's underlying belief that truth is more important than anything else.

So, the faith in science, which after all undeniably exists, cannot owe its origin to such a calculus of utility; rather it must have originated *in spite of* that fact that the disutility and dangerousness of 'the will to truth' or 'truth at any price' is proved to it constantly. ... Consequently, 'will to truth' does *not* mean 'I do not want to let myself be deceived' but – there is no alternative – 'I will not deceive, not even myself'; *and with that we stand on moral ground.* (GM 344)

From this Nietzsche concludes that the faith in science, and its commitment to unconditional truth, is a metaphysical faith; and those who affirm truth in these terms '*thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history'. They affirm the ascetic ideal, and piety. Yet, the pious include Nietzsche himself.

... you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine ... (GS 344 – and see also GM III §27)

This does not mean that truth has intrinsic value, as Williams, for example, seems to conclude from this section.¹⁴ It means that the will to truth, piety with regard to truthfulness, thus the regard for truth as intrinsically valuable, and thus the willingness to countenance even dangerous truths, motivates the scientific spirit, including that of a Nietzsche in challenging the will to truth.

14 See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Ch. 1, §3. Of course, Williams' main goal in his book is to construct his own genealogical defence of the intrinsic value of truth. That is not a topic for this essay. My point here is that neither GS 344 ('In what way we, too, are still pious'), nor GM III, argue for that conclusion.

Nietzsche does not regard truthfulness lightly:

At every step one has to wrestle for truth; one has had to surrender for it almost everything to which the heart, to which our love, our trust in life, cling otherwise. (A, §50)

This idea accompanies Nietzsche's return to philology (a revised conception of philology) in the later work.

Philology is to be understood here in a very wide sense as the art of reading well – of being able to read off a fact *without* falsifying it by interpretation, *without* losing caution, patience, subtlety in the desire for understanding. (A, §52)¹⁵

Part of the virtue he sees is the danger of truthfulness. For if our 'metaphysical faith' in truthfulness is allowed to express itself, then it can turn back on itself, and on its own underpinnings. So, for example, the section from the *Gay Science* to which I have referred ends with the question:

But what if this [the faith that truth is divine] were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie – if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie? (GS 344)

In the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche, expresses the same ambivalence. It is an ideal that he shares; it is an ideal that gives meaning to humans, but an ideal that, because it is disinterested, and otherworldly, is nihilistic.

... this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself – all this means – let us dare to grasp it – *a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life ...; but it is and remains a *will!* ... And, to repeat in conclusion what I said at the beginning: man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will. (GM III §28)

We have, therefore, on the one hand an ascetic ideal that is intrinsically nihilistic, and on the other hand a nihilism that arises out of the loss of metaphysical faith, a loss that the ideal itself forces on us.

15 See Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*: Ch. 6, for discussion of Nietzsche's attitudes to philology.

This paradox can be explicated by consideration of a self-referential paradox that seems to arise with regard to perspectivism.¹⁶

We might generate a paradox in the following way. We can take perspectivism to involve the claim that there is no statement such that it is true in all perspectives (or false in all perspectives). We can take this claim to amount to a denial of absolutism. If true, the claim is true either perspectivally, or in all perspectives. Now if we take it to be true in all perspectives, then there is a statement true in all perspectives, and absolutism is therefore true. Therefore, perspectivism must be perspectivally true. However, if perspectivism is true in not all perspectives, there are perspectives in which absolutism is true.

When absolutism is true, it might be true absolutely or perspectivally. If it is true absolutely, then perspectivism is false. However, perspectivally true absolutism – amounting to it not always being true that there is a statement that is true in all perspectives – seems inherently contradictory. If this analysis is right, for absolutism to be true anywhere, it must be true absolutely – in which case, again, absolutism is true for all perspectives.

It is tempting to try to remove the appearance of paradox.¹⁷ We might claim, for example, that the thesis is modal, and so doesn't undermine itself reflexively (Nehamas); or that the thesis is more moderate than it sometimes appears, allowing that perspectivism is only perspectivally true (Schrift); or that the thesis is a sentence of a Tarskian meta-language, and never includes itself within its scope (Clark).

I do not, however, think that this sort of response is appropriate. That is, it is not a question of whether one of these approaches removes the paradox, but whether the paradox requires a resolution. Attempts to salvage perspectivism lessen its interest, and ignore its motivation. I suggest that the thesis of perspectivism *is* that all

16 For recent discussion, see especially Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*: 65–67, Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*: 30–31 and Ch. 5, A. D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation* (New York and London, 1990): 153 and 182–4, and S. D. Hales, and R. C. Welshon, 'Truth, Paradox, and Nietzschean Perspectivism.' *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 11 (1994): 101–119.

17 To the extent that 'perspectivism' stands for a number of theses, my discussion here is (as will have been clear) restricted to perspectivism understood as an epistemological thesis.

truth claims are intrinsically conditioned or perspectival, and that the thesis asserts this of itself. Nietzsche himself is reasonably clear about this.¹⁸

It is not that we should simply ‘embrace’ the paradox. I will try to show in the final section why this would be hopeless. Rather, we should take the paradox as showing us something important about the logic of a will to truth.

We should, I think, see perspectivism as the culmination of the will to truth, and the position to which the will to truth returns. One dimension of the will to truth is critical and self-critical – questioning, challenging, tapping the idols of existing philosophies and listening for the sound of their hollowness, demonstrating the all too human origins of absolute claims, providing genealogical alternatives to metaphysical rationalizations. This critical activity is necessarily an activity of the will to truth; and this dimension of the will to truth, and its flowering in the naturalizing analyses that Nietzsche noted and engaged in himself, is what drives us towards perspectivism. That is, the will to truth drives us to a position – culminates in a position – which undermines itself, and amounts to nihilism.

We cannot in response adopt a knowing pose with regard to truth. For such a stance is in itself an expression of the will to truth – merely lacking honesty. No *comfortable* positions are available for us, since any position, and perspective, itself expresses the will to truth, and becomes a target for the will to truth. Any position that ‘resolves’ perspectivism misses the fundamental point of perspectivism.

Instead, we can only respond to the nihilism generated by perspectivism by taking on an ‘active nihilism’, in which we continue to practice our science while accepting the truth of perspectivism. Nietzsche seems to be asking, if we are to avoid the two poles of nihilism, that we both accept perspectivism *and* engage seriously (with the seriousness of a child at play as he puts it – BGE, §94, and see §57) in a philological search for value and truth. This seems to be a difficult task.

18 See BGE, § 22. Hales and Welshon, ‘Truth, Paradox and Nietzschean Perspectivism: 110, would probably see this passage as supporting Schrift’s interpretation and defence.

IV

I want to bring these discussions together by considering the major emblematic figures of Plato's and Nietzsche's work. These figures, Plato's Philosopher-King, and Nietzsche's new philosopher, are, in their ideal and impossible nature, crucial for an understanding of their creators' attitudes to truth, truthfulness and the nature of philosophy.

Clearly, there is an important contrast between Nietzsche and Plato, for in Plato there is an explicit absolutism regarding truth, and in the accompanying notion of Forms or ideas, we seem to be given an explicit metaphysical doctrine. However, as I hope the discussion has shown, this is not quite the same as the contrast between Nietzsche and what we might think of as 'Platonism'.¹⁹ For the Plato we experience through the *Republic* (and also *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, for example), has an importantly qualified approach to his absolutism.

As we saw, the value of that truth which consists in one's relation to the Forms is absolute, and connects to notions of piety and the Good. Here, truthfulness and truth are presented in moral terms. On the other hand, that truth (and its accompanying truthfulness) which pertains to the world of the city, of mere appearance and partiality – that truth which does not rise above belief – does not have absolute value, but is instead evaluated in terms of its contribution to wellbeing. We might say that here truthfulness is a pragmatic matter, but we do better, again, to see it in ethical terms, because of its relation to an ongoing process of the self and the state. In the city of the *Republic*, this second dimension (the nurture of the state) comes to the fore, and because of the overriding status of the grand project of the city, it subsumes consideration of the self, until self becomes the self of the Philosopher-Kings. However, on whatever level we focus, we come upon the interrelated notions of health and unity or effective balance of structure.²⁰

19 See Rosen, 'Remarks on Nietzsche's Platonism' on Plato's (and Nietzsche's) supposed Platonism.

20 Note that were we to trace the discussion from the wider image of the city back to the concept of the just self with which the discussion in Book 2 began, the account here would be restructured. We would then be concerned with the relation between the self and its reasoning part.

Furthermore, while Forms are regulative paradigms of thought and meaning, and while they are afforded a uniquely moral standing, one of the most striking features of the 'doctrine' of Forms is that mortals cannot have access to them. It is true that in the *Republic* there seems to be a suggestion that Philosopher-Kings can come to have access (and I will say more about this in a moment), but in an account of worldly truth, the absolute truth of the Forms can play no guiding role; at least, not as templates against which the truth of appearance and our 'imitations' can be measured.

So to the Philosopher-King. The need for this character arises because mortals will fail to recognize the appropriate coincidence between self-interest and the good of the city as a whole. That is, they cannot consider themselves and the city from the perspective of the Good. We therefore require as rulers wise and courageous physicians who can, among other things, administer the drug/poison of falsehood so as to bring about the best possible imitation of the Form of Justice.

[A]s they work, they'd look often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they're trying to put into human beings, on the other ...

They'd erase one thing, I suppose, and draw in another until they'd made characters for human beings that the gods would love as much as possible.
(*Republic* 501b)

This possibility, of adopting a comparative relation between the Forms and artifacts, depends on the production (through selection and training) of individuals who come to have access to the Forms – to know the Good – *and* have the skills and nature to apply this knowledge administratively. I will not detail this process here.²¹ Instead, I want to note a point made by the introduction of rulers who are philosophers, and draw attention to the peculiarity of these characters.

The peculiarity of the character of the Philosopher-King lies in the thought that it is *possible* for Plato. The general problem has already been alluded to: the sort of access to the Forms required by the Philosopher-King is seemingly impossible for

mortals, and clearly so in the other middle period dialogues – most explicitly in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Here, the value of the Forms is emphasized, and the value of a life which tends one towards the Forms. Yet humans are condemned to remain always lovers of the Forms, never acquaintances or companions, due to the fatal combination of mortal and immortal elements in their nature (see *Phaedrus*, 246a–248e). Mortals can at best, by the method of hypothesis outlined in the discussion of the line (508b–511e), attain the level of ‘thought’ (*dianoia*), but not that of ‘understanding’ (*noêsis*), which involves a grasp of the Forms.

It is true that in the *Republic* we are given techniques by which certain mortals might gain understanding, but this does not really ease the puzzlement. For the crucial aspect of their training that will enable the Philosopher-Kings to come to know the Forms is dialectic, and this is extraordinary. Dialectic, (the Socratic *elenchus*), is not a method for discovering truth in an absolute sense. Instead, it may demonstrate the inconsistency of a set of beliefs, and perhaps clarify our usage or understanding of a concept. This is the case throughout the Platonic corpus, and it retains this character when the style is reintroduced in the apparently late *Philebus*. In the *Republic*, however, dialectic is the crucial means by which the rulers will become the sort of philosopher who can instantiate the ideal physician/artist. Dialectic is supposed to be the process by which the soul progresses beyond thought to understanding or knowledge (see esp. 531d–534b).

Putting aside this contextual evidence, it seems in any case that the Philosopher-King has to maintain an inherently and unsustainably unstable division. The process of development that enables a philosopher to come to know the Good results in a specific nature, which can and *must* steadfastly maintain its gaze on the Good, and lives a *life* that supports this state. Yet the Philosopher-King must also engage with falsehood and live his or her life in the world of the *polis*. That is, those qualities which *may* enable certain mortals to know the Good require both a practice in relation to the Good and an enabling style of life which rule out, and are ruled out by, the practices of Philosopher-Kings as administrators. Consider also that the justification of verbal falsehoods derives from our need for them given our lack of

21 It is discussed in some detail in §3 of my ‘Administrative Lies and Philosopher-Kings’,

access to the Forms. The Philosopher-Kings supposedly have that knowledge which would render such falsehood unnecessary – and presumably (given the argument against gods being deceivers) also unwarranted.²²

Did Plato think that the Philosopher-King was possible? It seems unlikely, given the ironic mode of presentation of the whole of the ‘three waves’ section of the *Republic*, and given the anticipated un-sustainability of the imagined city.²³ At 546a–547b Socrates says (or rather, quotes the Muses as saying) that the city will decline because the (complicated) working out of the myth of the divine number will produce a collapse of the breeding program and an unhealthy mixing of types in those chosen to be guardians. This will occur because the guardians who monitor breeding in the city are forced to rely on sense perception and will therefore tend to miss the signs of this collapse. That is, the dual nature of the guardians is unsustainable and, given their role, this will destroy the balance of the city.

Like Plato, Nietzsche raises the question of the value of truth. Clearly, he rejects Plato’s absolutism – he denies the metaphysics that would give truth intrinsic value – yet he acknowledges the fact of the absolutist *stance*, and understands this stance as essentially a moral stance. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s rejection of metaphysical absolutism is complicated by acknowledgment that he is himself motivated by the will to truth. This means that Nietzsche has *both* an external anti-absolutist stance, and an internal stance, which must be absolutist, involving a metaphysical faith in truth.

Philosophical Inquiry, 18 (1996): 45-65.

- 22 See my ‘Administrative Lies and Philosopher-Kings’ for a more extensive discussion. I should mention an important qualification made there. It may be that the Philosopher-Kings do not make use of ‘verbal falsehood’ at all. First, there is no discussion of these rulers using falsehood; second, these godlike characters should be immune from the weakness which makes verbal falsehood useful for mortals (but note their reliance on sense perception); and third, the required nature of these characters outlined in Book 7 (see esp. 353d) seems to preclude the utterance of falsehoods of any sort. It is always, as far as I know, assumed that the Philosopher-Kings do use verbal falsehoods, and I accept that assumption in the present discussion.
- 23 See especially, D. A. Hyland, ‘Plato’s Three Waves and the Question of Utopia’, *Interpretation*, 18 (1990): 91-109. This reading moves beyond the classic Straussian treatment of Plato’s irony. See J. E. Seery, 1992. ‘Spelunkers of the World, Unite!’, in D. W. Conway and J. E. Seery (eds), *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal* (New York, 1992): 7-30, and C. L. Griswold, ‘Irony in the Platonic Dialogues’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002): 84-106, for further discussion of Plato’s irony.

Yet Nietzsche also emphasise the multiple realisations of the will to truth (ascetic ideal) and asks, not that we evaluate particular truths (as a pragmatist interpreter might think), but that we evaluate different realizations of the ascetic ideal, and insists that we be sensitive to the ambivalent character of each realization. That is, while noting Nietzsche's condemnations of certain forms of life, we need also to be sensitive to the facts that all his condemnation, and his approval, is nuanced.

So, while Nietzsche does not attach, from an external perspective, an intrinsic value to truth as such, he does value truthfulness. There are, as I have suggested, two dimensions to this. On the one hand, dogmatic absolutism is life denying, because it attempts to halt the process of creating new perspectives and stultify the human tendency to be puzzled and to question. It must be overcome by a determination not to forget that we are merely human, creating limited human perspectives (BGE, Preface). Yet on the other hand, nihilistic relativism, the view that because absolutism is false, because there is no True World, the will to truth can be replaced by careless and arbitrary play, is also life denying. Moreover, it involves denying that the appropriate exercise of the will to truth is essential to our well-being. So on this dimension truthfulness involves allowing oneself to be absorbed in the creative need for truth. Nietzsche suggests that these two aspects of well-being (the two dimensions of truthfulness) are exemplified in the new philosopher.

In Section 2 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, after challenging philosophers' faith in the existence of opposite values, Nietzsche raises a series of questions that characterize his approach, not asserting the valuelessness of truth and the value of its opposite, but asking that we consider the possibility.

For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust. It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things – maybe even one with them in essence. Maybe!

But who has the will to concern himself with such dangerous maybes? For that, one really has to wait for the advent of a new species of philosophers, such as have somehow another and converse taste and propensity from those we have known so far – philosophers of the dangerous 'maybe' in every sense.

And in all seriousness: I see such new philosophers coming up. (BGE, §2)

It would be inaccurate to see Nietzsche as introducing a character in the same explicit way that the Philosopher King is introduced. There are, for example, no explicit claims about the task of the new philosopher. However, I do want to claim that in the various references to the new philosopher, and to philosophers of the future, Nietzsche is purporting to imagine a character who can resolve the dilemma of truthfulness. The new philosopher has the capacity to embrace the nihilism that accompanies the recognition that there is no true world, and yet create truths. The new philosopher is able to assert truths as truths while acknowledging *and* skillfully forgetting that they are (in an absolutist sense) falsehoods, fabrications and simplifications arising out of our humanity. Furthermore, the new philosopher has the capacity to be what Nietzsche calls an 'active nihilist' (WP, §§ 22 and 23).

Now there is no issue of metaphysical impossibility here. The new philosopher is not required to bridge a gap between the human and the divine. However, we must ask whether there is a psychological paradox in the conception of this character – a paradox shared with the Philosopher-King. The new philosopher, if it is to play the role I have suggested, is required to exemplify the will to power through exercise of the will to truth, and thereby avoid the abyss of nihilism or relativism – this is one dimension of what I have referred to as truthfulness. Yet, the new philosopher would be supposed to do this while at the same time accepting the ubiquity of perspectivism, thereby avoiding the tyranny of dogmatism. Which is to say that the new philosopher is to create truths as if searching for truth while *remembering* that his position is that of the human all too human. This balancing act of forgetting/remembering presents the apparent psychological impossibility of the new philosopher.

Some may say that the claim of psychological impossibility here depends on a somewhat hyperbolic approach to such matters, and that if one took a more Humean stance the two perspectives could easily be held by the same character. I doubt this, and I suspect that when it came to the epistemic crunch the Humeans would as well. But I don't want to take up the extensive discussion this requires. For it certainly seems that Nietzsche should in any case reject my representation of the new philosopher as a *character*.

If the conflict between remembering and forgetting could be resolved in a character – that is, in a subjectivity that could attain its unity and purpose through

forgetfulness, yet maintain its integrity through remembering – then surely we would have discovered just that knowing subjectivity which was the ideal of absolutism. That is, we would have overcome Nietzsche's deconstruction of the subjectivity that lay at the core of absolutism.

So to cheerfully call for the new philosopher amounts to a reassertion, at a higher level, of the ascetic ideal – of, as Nietzsche would put it, an end to contingency and becoming through a unity of being and becoming. That is, the ideal philosopher as a character has attained true, perspective-free knowledge, and in doing this, and putting an end to contingency and doubt, has put an end to the conditions for living well, has, that is to say, laid the foundations for the return of passive nihilism.²⁴ So it seems that we best read Nietzsche's hailing of the new philosopher (announced 'in all seriousness') as ironic, asking us to think differently about the *whole* question of our relation, as subjects, to truth and knowledge. These comments, in effect, repeat my earlier point about the desire to resolve the paradox of perspectivism.

If we see Nietzsche's ideal philosopher as a *process*, not a fixed character or 'way of thinking', just as we saw truth as a process, the situation may change. We now can regard the *practice of philosophy* as ideally a continual process of engagement with the twin poles of dogmatism and passive nihilism, and of engagement with different perspectives. Were this process brought to an end, we would have attained the nihilism of the triumph of dogmatism, or the nihilism of the collapse into relativism – and this would amount to the end of philosophy. Yet philosophy continues, because there is at its core a certain irrationality – a certain childishness, a Dionysian streak, the unconscious, a will to power, and a will to experiment – which ignores the inevitability of nihilism, and in spite of that inevitability, keeps driving the process on.

24 I am thus sympathetic to Conway's criticism of 'contemporary ironists', who, although professed heirs of Nietzsche 'enjoy the distinctly un-Nietzschean luxury of exempting themselves from their own irony. The irony of these wayward heirs of Nietzsche is ultimately self-reverential – and therefore conservative – in scope. This artificially limited – and so unironic – deployment of irony issues in the smug self-assurance that ironists know something that others do not, even if it is that there is nothing to know' (p. 73). Conway describes these as 'Socratic' ironists, in contrast to Nietzsche (and I would add, in contrast to Plato). D. W. Conway, 'Comedians of the Ascetic Ideal: The Performance of Genealogy', in D. W. Conway and J. E. Seery (eds), *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal* (New York, 1992): 73-95.

I do not mean to insist that the process cannot occur in an individual. Rather, I am denying that the process can be contained in a consciousness, as a way of thinking.

This suggests a way of responding to both figures. It seems that Plato and Nietzsche projected unrealizable ideals as their solution to the task of reconciling the ideal and the actual. It seems plausible that neither thought that his imagined figure was possible. However, at another level, these characters are important products of the meta-philosophical imaginations of their creators, which both establish ideals, and produce models, of philosophical practice as a process in constant tension.

Both characters are pretended to maintain a set of competing demands: demands of attitude and demands of focus. The Philosopher-King is asked to gaze only on the Forms, yet also to examine the details of the city (on the one hand to value the true above all else, on the other hand to calculate the usefulness of truthfulness). And the Philosopher-King is also asked to maintain a balance between the uselessness of true philosophical inclination, and the viciousness of one who deals in the city. The new philosopher will negotiate the path between dogmatism and nihilism. On the one hand, aiming to create new dominating perspectives, yet repeatedly striving for truth with the care of a philologist. On the other hand, demonstrating, with the courage of truthfulness, the perspectival nature of all knowledge, and demanding that truth be subservient to life. Each character thus provides a dramatic model of an ongoing tension.

Neither character provides a model for the establishment of a stable identity, character or subject, and so Plato and Nietzsche have deeply anti-conservative implications; yet they may also lay out the requirements of healthy philosophical practice. These requirements may capture the way in which philosophy, as a decentred practice rather than a determinate procedure, can be constructed and reconstructed through a forest of competing ideals, demands and inclinations.²⁵

25 This paper originated in a conversation some years ago with Alexander Nehamas. Since then, I have been influenced by many discussions, but I would like to make special mention of Philip Barker, Robert Dunn and Adrian Walsh. I would also like to thank a reviewer for the Journal for helpful and thought-provoking comments.