

NIETZSCHE ON KNOWLEDGE AND INTERPRETATION

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Since Plato's *Theaetetus* the most persistent view about the nature of knowledge has been that knowledge is "justified true belief" (JTB). This definition has attained its position among epistemic analyses owing to its traditionally close connection with the correspondence theory of truth. In fact, to say that the JTB analysis of knowledge has been the most persistent philosophical view about the nature of knowledge is just to say that the correspondence theory of truth has been the most persistent theory of truth. In spite of its enduring position, however, there have been both strong rejections of and enticing alternatives to this theory. In the following essay I shall attempt to articulate Nietzsche's reasons for rejecting this traditional theory of truth and show how his theory of the genesis of interpretation and belief provides an alternative to the traditional analysis of knowledge.

1

The doctrine that knowledge is JTB claims that for an individual to know something, say 'x', the individual must *believe* 'x', must be *justified* in believing 'x', and 'x' *must be a fact* or an actually existing state of affairs. This definition of knowledge *can* be read to imply a correspondence theory of truth.¹

¹ I emphasize the word "can" because the JTB analysis does not necessarily imply a correspondence theory of truth. The interpretation of the JTB analysis that follows, however, is to one adhered to by Nietzsche, and this construal does demand some form of the correspondence theory of truth as a companion theory to the JTB analysis of knowledge.

Diálogos, 49 (1987) pp. 65-76.

First, note that the JTB analysis implies the following: If John knows 'x', then 'x'. The JTB analysis implies this because its second element, the "true," (or the trueness of a belief) depends upon the true, independently existing fact that 'x' is the case. But, insofar as the second requirement of the JTB analysis depends upon an independently existing fact, then this analysis as a whole depends upon a correspondence theory of truth. If "John knows 'x' *only* if 'x'," then John's knowing (and the possibility of our knowing about John's knowing) is possible only because 'x' is the case. When the JTB analyst claims that "if John knows 'x', then 'x'," it is thus implied that it is the case that "John knows 'x' because 'x'" and not that 'x' because John knows it. This means that 'x' is an independently existing fact to which our belief must correspond if it is to warrant the title of "knowledge."

When, on the other hand, our belief is about 'x', and of the form that 'x' is such and such, while either 'x' is not, or it is not the case that 'x' is such and such, then our belief is *mere belief*, indeed it is falsehood and not knowledge at all. The JTB analysis thus requires that an independently existing fact does correspond to our belief if our belief is to be "knowledge." This presupposed belief in independently existing true facts—facts that determine our knowledge *as* knowledge—depicts the correspondent element inherent in the JTB analysis.

Nietzsche, however, argued that this correspondent factor implies not only a belief about our possible knowledge of reality, but also a belief about reality itself. He suggested that insofar as knowledge is taken as an abiding and relatively stable phenomenon, and insofar as it is thought to be based upon and governed by the real—the correspondent to justified belief—then the real, too, must be thought to be relatively stable and abiding. This is so because the conditional relation between knowledge and its objects inherent to the correspondence theory of truth makes knowledge the dependent component of the relation. We *can* know the world because it is knowable. And what is knowable? By Nietzsche's lights, the history of philosophy resounds with the claim that the knowable is that which does not change.²

² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. by Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (Vintage Books: New York, 1968). Sections 407, 507-21. (Hereafter cited as *WP*. In all references to Nietzsche's work citations refer to sections or paragraphs.) *The Portable Nietzsche*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (The Viking Press: New York, 1968), *Twilight of the Idols*, " 'Reason' in Philosophy," 1-3.

But if knowledge of reality requires a relatively stable world—a world to which our ideas, propositions, and beliefs *can* correspond—then for Nietzsche there is no knowledge. And insofar as knowledge is conceived of in this way alone, then Nietzsche does deny that there is any. Let us clarify the reasoning behind his position.

I have argued, on behalf of Nietzsche, that the JTB analysis of knowledge implies a correspondence theory of truth and that a correspondence theory of truth implies possible knowledge of reality as it “really is.” Finally, the possibility of knowledge of reality as it “truly is” implies a belief in a reality that is abiding and stable enough to be knowable. Nietzsche, of course, denies the final consequence of these implications, and thereby denies their antecedent assumptions. For him, “reality” is an unabiding flux of power quanta.³ It “is in all eternity chaos.”⁴ But since the JTB analysis makes knowledge dependent upon the fixed reality of a case, and since for Nietzsche there is no “case” which is simply the case, then likewise there is no knowledge which is simply *of* the case. And indeed, there can be none.

Nietzsche does not reject the traditional analysis of knowledge merely on the basis of his theory of reality, however. After all, if he did this he would simply oppose to the Platonic idea of reality (as stable, abiding, and unchanging) his own theory of reality; and neither of these theories seems self-justifying in its own right. Each, in fact, motivates and is supported by (or is motivated by and supports) a companion theory of truth. Thus, Nietzsche also criticizes the correspondence theory of truth, that to him represents the epistemic side of the frozen reality-picture of the Platonic tradition.

Nietzsche’s criticisms occur without explicit mention that his target is the correspondence theory of truth, but his target is clear. Consider, for instance, these comments:

The intellect cannot criticize itself, simply because it cannot be compared with other species of intellect and because its capacity to know would be revealed only in the presence of “true reality,” i.e., because in order to criticize the intellect we should have to be a higher being with “absolute

³ *WP*, 1067.

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), 109. (Hereafter cited as *GS*.)

knowledge." This presupposes that, distinct from every perspective kind of outlook or sensual-spiritual appropriation, something exists, an outlooked or sensual-spiritual appropriation, something exists, an "in-itself."⁵

Nietzsche thus criticizes the ability of the intellect to criticize itself, and he does so by reference to the notions of "true reality" and "absolute knowledge." His point can be interpreted in this way: *Any time we define knowledge by reference to the true* (e.g., when we say knowledge is JTB), *then we assume knowledge of the true apart from our very act of knowing it.* But this is circular in the most vicious way. If knowledge is JTB, then we would have to know that our knowledge is true before we know it is knowledge. But this is precisely what is in question whenever we ask: "Is my (or our) belief that 'x' is true, knowledge?" To reply that my (or our) belief that "'x' is true" is knowledge, if 'x' is true, is no help at all. The fundamental question, "Is 'x' true?" remains untouched and it can be decided upon only by an *act* of knowing or holding-true. But this is always conditioned knowledge, never absolute; it is knowledge that is determined true by our ways and modes of knowing, and not by a "truth-in-itself" or "real-in-itself."⁶

Nietzsche makes a similar point when he writes:

One would have to know what *being* is, in order to decide whether this or that is real (e.g., "the facts of consciousness"); in the same way, what *certainty* is, what *knowledge* is, and the like. —But since we do not know this, a critique of the faculty of knowledge is senseless: how should a tool be able to criticize itself when it can use only itself for the critique? It cannot even define itself!⁷

Directed towards the correspondence theory of truth (and by implication, towards the JTB analysis of knowledge—which is precisely a definition of knowledge) Nietzsche's point is this: If knowledge is defined as correspondence between intellect and thing or proposition and fact, then any attempt to verify such knowledge would require that the intellect step outside this act of correspondence in order to see if

⁵ *WP*, 473.

⁶ The proponents of the JTB analysis would respond to this by saying that the JTB analysis is not meant to function as a *criterion for testing knowledge*; but rather, it is a *definition* of what knowledge *is*, if and when we have it. Nietzsche would have responded by saying that without a criterion for testing knowledge, a definition of it is vacuous, unverifiable, and lacking philosophical value.

⁷ *WP*, 486.

there is in fact a correspondence. But even if the intellect could do this, then once again an act of correspondence between intellect and thing would be presupposed (for the intellect would now be in relation to the relationship of intellect and thing), and the potential hierarchy of correspondencies could be multiplied *ad infinitum* without ever verifying the original correspondence between intellect and what is “truly the case.”

It is this impossibility of verifying anything like a first-order correspondence that leads Nietzsche to an alternative analysis of knowledge. If the intellect should be such that it conditions all that it knows, then what the intellect knows is not simply “what is the case,” but what “is the case” is “the case” just insofar as the intellect knows it in precisely the way in which it does so know it. And since we cannot be said to hold something as true without knowledge of that “truth,” it is reversing cause and effect to say that truth or the real *determines* knowledge. The alternative is clear, however: knowledge *conditions* truth.

3

Nietzsche did believe that knowledge conditions truth because for him all knowledge followed from an interpretative understanding, and any given “truth” reflected only one of many possible interpretations. We can best understand how Nietzsche reached this position by considering his rejection of the notion of “things-in-themselves.”

As he does with the notion of truth, Nietzsche uses the notion of the thing-in-itself in two radically different ways without telling us when, or even that, he does so. First, he uses the term *Ding-an-sich* in reference to the Kantian notion of a *noumenal* something-I-know-not-what. This is a notion, Nietzsche believes, with which we must break absolutely, and with which he does break absolutely.⁸ On the other hand, Nietzsche uses the notion of the *Ding-an-sich* to refer to an *intra-phenomenal* something-I-know-not-what. And it is this second usage of the notion that Nietzsche uses as a conceptual foil for his theory of interpretation.

We receive the clue for Nietzsche’s non-noumenal conception of things-in-themselves when he writes that “...the antithesis of this phen-

⁸ *WP*, 559.

omenal world is not 'the true world', but the formless unformulable world of the chaos of sensations—*another kind* of phenomenal world, a kind unknowable for us."⁹ This unknowable world of chaotic sensations, this other kind of phenomenal world, is the "world" Nietzsche has in mind when he rejects the possibility of knowledge of things-in-themselves or reality-in-itself. Hence, when Nietzsche rejects the correspondence theory of truth because it implies knowledge of "real" things-in-themselves, he is not claiming that the correspondence theory implies correspondence with noumena (in the Kantian sense), but rather that it implies knowledge of phenomenal things as *they are in-themselves*. But, by Nietzsche's lights, even this kind of (correspondence) knowledge is impossible because the would-be phenomenal things-in-themselves (the 'x' to which the warranted belief corresponds) have themselves always-already been layered-over by perspectival interpretations, and thereby, by meanings.¹⁰ Whence: "A 'thing-in-itself' [is] just as perverse as a 'sense-in-itself,' a 'meaning-in-itself.' There are no 'facts-in-themselves,' for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be 'facts.'" ¹¹ But as soon as a sense is projected into things or "exported into reality,"¹² Nietzsche can conclude that any attempt to define knowledge by reference to the true or to what is the case is to engage in an act of self-deception by (willfully) forgetting that the true or the case is *as it is*, only insofar as it is known *as it is known*. "At the bottom of it [i.e., of knowing] there always lies 'what is that for *me*?' (for us, for all that lives, etc.)."¹³

Phrased more precisely, Nietzsche's position is this: It is not the case that "if John knows 'x', then 'x'" and "John *can* know 'x' only because 'x'"; but rather, when John knows 'x', then 'x' is "the case" *as it is the case* because John knows it in precisely the way in which he does so know it. This means that if John knows 'x', then John conditions 'x' and makes 'x' knowable *as it is known*—by the very act of knowing it. This is what Nietzsche means when he writes: "Coming to know means 'to place oneself in a conditional relation to something'; to feel oneself conditioned by something and oneself to condition it."¹⁴

⁹ *WP*, 569.

¹⁰ One of Nietzsche's definitions of interpretation is "the introduction of meaning" (*WP*, 604).

¹¹ *WP*, 556.

¹² Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, tr. by Helen Zimmern (George Allen and Unwin LTD: London, 1924), 16. (Hereafter cited as *HAH*.)

¹³ *WP*, 556.

¹⁴ *WP*, 555.

In light of this "conditional" or perspectival theory of understanding many of Nietzsche's more outlandish statements about epistemic matters appear less bizarre. When he claims, for instance, that "there are no things"¹⁵ his point, not unlike the position of many contemporary phenomenologists and psychologists, is that the concept of any given "thing" is always meaning-laden by its relations to other objects, all of which "hang-together" in a network of significant reference-relations so related by some knower, within some society, etc.¹⁶ Any given "thing" has a meaning *as* this or that *sort* of thing (standing in relation to other such things), and such meaning or significance implies a knower. It is for this reason that Nietzsche so insightfully derives the absurdity of the notion of a "thing-in-itself" (Ding-an-sich) from the manifest absurdity of a "sense-in-itself" (Sinn-an-sich).¹⁷ The positive force of his reduction is simply that a thing (Ding) implies a sense (Sinn) and a sense implies a knower.

That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity, is a quite idle hypothesis: it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing freed from all relationships would still be a thing.¹⁸

Nietzsche's interpretation theory, then, depicts the objects of knowledge (i.e., the "facts" of all "cases") as conception-dependent. For Nietzsche, this conception-dependence follows from the spatial-temporal finitude of all animal knowing and this finitude determines the perspective from which any given animal, or group of animals, knows. Perspectives demand interpretation since there is no complete view of "the case," and interpretation implies conception-dependence. Consequently, Nietzsche finds that all understanding is understanding 'as', and understanding 'as' implies the sense-bestowing act of interpretation.¹⁹

But does such perspectival, interpretative understanding mean random understanding? Does it force us into a solipsistic evaluation of knowledge? Or worse, does Nietzsche's theory of interpretative knowl-

¹⁵ *WP*, 634.

¹⁶ *WP*, 557.

¹⁷ *WP*, 556.

¹⁸ *WP*, 560.

¹⁹ Nietzsche's position on interpretation is, of course, one of the strong influences on Heidegger's famous theory of interpretation developed in sections 31-3 of *Being and Time*, tr. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper & Row: New York, 1962).

edge forfeit the possibility of establishing truths that abide and are agreed upon by all? In section IV I shall show why these problems do not follow from Nietzsche's theory.

4

Nietzsche's arguments for the claim that knowledge conditions truth are quite different from the arguments Kant offers for a similar position. Not only does Nietzsche pull any would-be thing-in-itself into the phenomenal realm (albeit, an unknowable phenomenal realm), he also argues that the human being's interpretative categories are much more active and creative, much less *a priori*, than the Kantian categories would permit.²⁰ Whereas the Kantian categories of the understanding function as an inexorable framework for the perpetuity of the truths that we hold, Nietzsche's theory of interpretative genesis offers no such reified guarantee. Whereas Kant provides an abiding faculty for the perpetual banishment of epistemic chaos, Nietzsche provides only a perspectival interpretation which may, and indeed must, change.²¹ But if we look into the matter, we shall see that Nietzsche, too, has a substructure providing for the relative perpetuity of our knowledge. Nietzsche's substructure for epistēmē, however, is not transcendental, but rather it is bio-logical.²²

Perhaps Nietzsche's most famous statement in connection with this issue is his claim that, "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value of knowledge for *life* is ultimately decisive."²³ Probably in conjunction with this claim Nietzsche conjectures that: "It is improbable that our 'knowledge' should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life."²⁴ He is thus extending his initial position by claiming that not only "truth," but "knowledge" too, is determined by the requirements

²⁰ *HAH*, 16. *GS*, 121. *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1966), II. (Hereafter cited as *BGE*.) *Werke in drei Bänden*, "Nachlass," ed. by Karl Schlechta, v. 3 (Carl Hanser Verlag: Munich, 1958), p. 726.

²¹ For Nietzsche's criticism of Kant's postulation of faculties see *BGE*, II.

²² Ultimately, it is metaphysical. The will-to-power provides the ultimate grounds for knowing. However, "life is the will-to-power" (*WP*, 640-687) and my construal of Nietzsche's replacement for the transcendental deduction will halt at the level of his quasi-empirical biological deduction.

²³ *WP*, 493.

²⁴ *WP*, 494.

for living. But, in light of this circumstance, as knowledge conditions truth, so further, life conditions knowledge. This means that *the conditions for the possibility of knowledge are themselves determined by the requirements for the actuality of life*. Hence, Nietzsche's famous statement:

...it is high time to replace the Kantian question, "How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?" by another question, "Why is belief in such judgments *necessary*?"—and to comprehend that such judgments must be *believed to be true*....²⁵

It is within this conceptual framework which interprets knowledge in terms of its necessity for life that interpretative understanding becomes justified *as* knowledge.

Nietzsche is as direct as we could wish about this. He writes that...

knowledge... is to be regarded in a strict and narrow anthropocentric and biological sense.... The utility of preservation... 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.²⁶

However, these factual truths (as Nietzsche views them) are themselves grounded in a deeper "fact"; namely that, "The organic process [itself] constantly presupposes interpretations."²⁷ The interpretations resulting from the organic process will let the creature survive (if in fact the creature *does* survive) and, it is hoped, they will also allow the creature to prosper, that is, to increase in power. Because of the organic basis of our sense organs these interpretations will be so deeply rooted in our perceptions that from the first, we will believe them. And, owing to such indigenous interpretative schemas: "Believing is the primal beginning even in every sense impression: a kind of affirmation, the first intellectual activity! A 'holding-true'- in the beginning!"²⁸ And this organic basis of interpretation supplies the answer to Nietzsche's

²⁵ *BGE*, II. Also see *WP*, 530.

²⁶ *WP*, 480.

²⁷ *WP*, 643.

²⁸ *WP*, 506.

assertively disguised question: "Therefore it is to be explained: how 'holding-true' first arose!"²⁹

Nietzsche's position, then, is that the bodily organs make the first (prereflective and inescapable) interpretation, while cognition, culture, and linguistic understanding make possible the second (potentially reflective and variable) interpretation. Because of the first interpretation we *must* believe in things as they appear; because of the second we *can* have problems like the problems of knowledge and truth. But since the first interpretative level is grounded in the requirements for life, to define knowledge by reference to the true is to confuse cause and effect. The possibility for truth is based upon the requirements for knowledge and the possibility for knowledge is based upon the requirements for life. Simply put, life will interpret the world (the "true" broadly defined) as it *needs* to interpret it.³⁰ If it does not, it will simply no longer be—life.

Because he views the needs of life as the basis for knowledge, Nietzsche, not unlike Peirce and Dewey, gives *belief* priority over knowledge. For instance, he tells us that, "Knowledge is judgment! But judgment is a belief that something is thus and thus! And *not* knowledge!.... The legitimacy of belief in knowledge is always presupposed."³¹ Indeed, he argues that "...what is needed is that something must be held to be true—*not* that something *is* true."³² Nonetheless, if something is held to be true which is radically "false," then the creatures that hold it will be forced to change their beliefs or they will perish. Or, perhaps the issue under consideration is non-essential to life, and then the "false" belief would not *need* to be changed.

In any case, Nietzsche's position results in something like a compatibilistic theory of knowledge and truth. In place of the position that "if John knows 'x', then 'x'," where the "fact" of John's knowledge would be determined by (reference to) 'x', Nietzsche's position would be something like this: John believes 'a', John believes 'b', John believes 'c',... John believes 'n'; and John is justified in his beliefs if 'a' is compatible with 'b', 'b' is compatible with 'c',... 'm' is compatible with 'n', etc. For Nietzsche, this relationship of beliefs (and implicitly,

²⁹ *WP*, 506.

³⁰ *WP*, 481, 498, 505.

³¹ *WP*, 530.

³² *WP*, 507.

survival) is the highest guarantee we can have of knowledge. And thus he writes: "There are no isolated judgments! An isolated judgment is never 'true,' never knowledge; only in the connection and relation of many judgments [i.e., beliefs] is there any surety."³³

To argue as Nietzsche does that knowledge is determined by the compatibility of one's beliefs (and their relation to survival and prosperity), however, is not to say that *all* of one's beliefs must be compatible with each other (or with increased survival possibilities or increased prosperity). The network of beliefs of any given individual (let alone species) is so complicated, intricate, and manifold, that every individual lives with some beliefs that are incompatible with others. So many beliefs are there, however, that an entire life can be lived without these beliefs facing it off. In fact, incompatible beliefs are sometimes recognized and still allowed co-existence because we like (the actions connected with) both beliefs, and their incompatibility causes less cognitive dissonance than would result from losing either of them.

The possibility of the co-existence of incompatible beliefs, however, does not subvert Nietzsche's compatibilistic theory of knowledge and truth. There are levels at which compatibility simply *must* be attained. Unsurprisingly, this is at the level of beliefs pertaining directly to survival. Nietzsche makes this point when he writes:

The categories are "truths" only in the sense that they are conditions of life for us....

The subjective compulsion not to contradict here is a biological compulsion: the instinct for the utility of inferring as we do infer is part of us, we almost are this instinct....³⁴

At the levels of life that these fundamental belief effects, our beliefs must be compatible because for Nietzsche, *the logical law of non-contradiction is ultimately a bio-logical law of the non-incompatibility of essential beliefs*. And hence: "The most strongly believed a priori 'truths' are for me—*provisional assumptions*; ...very well acquired... belief[s], so much a part of us that not to believe in [them] would destroy the race."³⁵

³³ *WP*, 530.

³⁴ *PW*, 515.

³⁵ *WP*, 497.

Nietzsche's positive position on knowledge and truth can now be formulated: Truth is conditioned by knowledge and knowledge by life. Insofar as there are relatively constant requirements for life (and these requirements are met), then there will be relatively common conditions for knowledge. These common conditions for knowledge will result, to varying degree, in consensus about the true, and this consensus about the true will prove true or false in relation to the progress or decline of the species. If it is the case that our needs interpret the world, then insofar as there are common needs there will be common interpretations—which means there will be common knowledge conditioning common truths. At its most fundamental level this knowledge will be belief. We will be holding true what we need to hold true; what our organs and ancestors have made appear true. Owing to this inescapable genealogy of understanding, neither knowledge nor truth can be measured by “the case” because our interpretations have made all the facts appear *as* they appear. For Nietzsche, knowledge is not and cannot be justified true belief. At best, it is *belief that our beliefs are justified*. Stated in short, anytime we *think* that we have knowledge as JTB, we are actually in a position of “BBJ”—belief that our belief is justified. And indeed, as finite and mortal creatures, what more should we expect?

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