



#78 Nietzsche and Truth: Skepticism and The Free Spirit

“Perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what “truthfulness” is.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

These words, penned by Nietzsche in Beyond Good and Evil, reflect his belief that in many cases what are considered established truths are instead errors, lies, and convictions that have grown out of fear, need, and cowardice.

“I was the first to discover the truth by being the first to experience lies as lies.” (Ecce Homo)

In this video we’ll investigate one variety of “truth” Nietzsche sought to expose as error, explain his method for attaining the truth, and introduce his notion of the “genuine philosopher” – the “free spirit” who has become master over his mind.

A commonly held view is that the good and the true are inextricably connected. Adherents of this view tend to believe that the discovery of truth is a pleasurable process, and the more truths that are discovered the better off humanity will be.

Nietzsche was skeptical of this view, suggesting that it was often adopted for psychological purposes. Specifically, to protect people from the realization that the discovery of truth is not always pleasurable, but can sometimes agitate and torture an individual.

While some truths can liberate the individual and result in the advancement of mankind, other truths can stimulate despair and the degeneration of the human race. Thus, the true and the good, in Nietzsche’s view, are often conflicting.

“Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish.”(Beyond Good and Evil)

In Human, all too Human he echoed this idea:



“There is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the good of mankind.” (Human, all too Human)

As the realization of truths is not always beneficial, Nietzsche insisted that untruth and the will to ignorance has reigned over all cultures stretching back into the ancient past. Many of man’s so called “truths” which have been “discovered” are nothing but “irrefutable errors”, falsifications of the world without which the human species would have perished long ago.

“Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.” (The Gay Science)

In a note collected in the Will to Power he reiterated this idea:

“Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive.” (The Will to Power)

While most people throughout history have held on to errors they believed to be truths, there are always a select few individuals who are capable of seeking the truth at all costs. These people possess a unique strength, generated by the realization that the quest for truth is neither peaceful nor pleasurable, but a battle requiring courage and vigor.

“Man has had to fight for every atom of the truth, and has had to pay for it almost everything that the heart, that human love, that human trust cling to. Greatness of soul is needed for this business: the service of truth is the hardest of all services.” (The Antichrist)

For the individual strong enough to seek the truth, Nietzsche advocated a method of attaining knowledge called “experimentalism”, based on his belief that “Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.”(Human, all too Human).

A lie is an outward expression of a falsehood one inwardly knows to be false, meaning the liar can still know the truth. A conviction, on the other hand, is an inward certainty one has attained the truth, and thus in many cases, gives way to



an arrogance that enmeshes one in a web of delusion and falsehood, and cuts one off from the possibility of moving towards knowledge.

“The claim that truth is found and that ignorance and error are at an end is one of the most potent seductions there is. Supposing it is believed, then the will to examination, investigation, caution, experiment is paralyzed... “Truth” is therefore more fateful than error and ignorance, because it cuts off the forces that work toward enlightenment and knowledge.”(The Will to Power)

Employing the experimentalism advocated by Nietzsche involves becoming your own greatest critic, subjecting your cherished convictions to constant assessment, and attacking every so called “truth” you believe, in order to determine how strong its foundations really are. It involves actively seeking out and experimenting with new ideas, trying them on for size, so to speak, and continually updating and improving your judgments about the world.

After all, the ability to change our beliefs is a unique and precious capacity of the human mind – one of its defining features; but it must be continually exercised to prevent atrophy. Nietzsche’s experimentalism trains this capacity, and is thus a counterforce against the attraction people feel towards conforming to narrow faiths and dogmatic visions of the world.

“The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind.”(Dawn of Day)
In an aphorism titled “To What Extent The Thinker Loves His Enemy” from the Dawn of Day, Nietzsche advised:

“Make it a rule never to withhold or conceal from yourself anything that may be thought against your own thoughts. Vow it! This is the essential requirement of honest thinking. You must undertake such a campaign against yourself every day.” (Dawn of Day)

Most people are unable to abide by this daily practice as their personal identity becomes tied up with certain beliefs they hold on faith. Such people become fearful of new and challenging ideas, seeing them as a threat to their character and worldview.



The skeptic, in contrast, adopts a more profitable approach by maintaining a proper distance from his beliefs. He is therefore able to play with ideas, move in and out of them with grace and suppleness, and use them as tools in the service of a heroic goal.

Nietzsche contrasted the skeptic and the man of faith. “A mind that aspires to great things...is necessarily sceptical.” (The Antichrist) While, “The need for faith, for anything unconditional in yes and no, is a proof of weakness.” (The Will to Power)

The individual who is able to integrate Nietzsche’s experimentalism into their life, and live from the perspective of various viewpoints and experiment with ideas in the service of a “grand passion”, Nietzsche called “the free spirit”.

While the vast majority of people are “bound spirits”, prisoners of beliefs that have been inculcated into them by their parents, governments, and religions, the free spirit is one who has liberated himself from these chains. “The term “free spirit” here is not to be understood in any other sense; it means a spirit that has become free, that has taken possession of itself.” (Ecce Homo)

In contrast to bound spirits, whose weakness motivates them to censor and label as dangerous ideas which challenge their worldview, the free spirit, as “a monster of courage and curiosity...a born adventurer and discoverer” (Nietzsche), is driven to grasp even the treacherous truths which would destroy the weak.

But with the spirit of the search for truth on their side, the free spirit also understands that in the search for truth it is not only terribleness that one will find, but truths that are liberating both to the individual and society, and which, for various reasons, are often hidden away or deemed blasphemous by mainstream opinion.

In seeking these truths, the free spirit – the “genuine and solitary philosopher” – becomes an enemy of all those who attempt to promote ignorance for the sake of gaining power over others.



As master of his mind, the free spirit forms an internal vault untouchable by those who wish to deceive, and thus, perhaps unknowingly, keeps alive the flame of truth even in darker ages of ignorance, censorship, and tyranny.

As Nietzsche penned:

“Where there have been powerful societies, governments, religions, public opinions, in short wherever there has been tyranny, there the solitary philosopher has been hated; for philosophy offers an asylum to a man into which no tyranny can force its way, the inward cave, the labyrinth of the heart: and that annoys the tyrants.” (Untimely Meditations III)