

Nietzsche and Truth: Skepticism and The Free Spirit



The Good and The True are Often Conflicting

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

Furthermore, if an opinion makes us glad, it must be true; if its effect is good, it in itself must be good and true. Here one is attributing to the effect the predicate "gladdening," "good," in the sense of the useful, and providing the cause with the same predicate "good," but now in the sense of the logically valid. The reversal of the proposition is: if a thing cannot prevail and maintain itself, it must be wrong; if an opinion tortures and agitates, it must be false. (Human, all too Human)

The proof by "pleasure" is a proof of "pleasure--nothing more; why in the world should it be assumed that true judgments give more pleasure than false ones, and that, in conformity to some pre-established harmony, they necessarily bring agreeable feelings in their train?--The experience of all disciplined and profound minds teaches the contrary. 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)

Happiness and virtue are no arguments. But people like to forget—even sober spirits—that making unhappy and evil are no counterarguments. 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, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.¹⁹ But there is no doubt at all that the evil and unhappy are more favored

when it comes to the discovery of certain parts of truth, and that the probability of their success here is greater (BGE)

“Contempt, hatred against everything that passes, changes, alters—from whence this valuing of the stable. Obviously the will to truth is here merely the demand for a *world of the stable*.” (The Will to Power)

“Truths” as Irrefutable Errors

“The strength of knowledge does not depend on its degree of truth, but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life. (The Gay Science)

“The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating. And we are fundamentally inclined to claim that the falsest judgments... are the most indispensable for us.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

“It is necessary for you to grasp, that without this kind of ignorance life itself would be impossible, that it is a condition under which alone the living [thing] preserves and develops itself”. (The Will to Power)

“all self-reflection of the spirit has its dangers, in that it could be useful and important for one's activity, to interpret oneself falsely.” (The Will to Power)

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)

What are man's truths ultimately? Merely his irrefutable errors. (Gay Science)

That which we now call the world is the result of a number of errors and fantasies, which came about gradually in the overall development of organic beings, fusing with one another, and now handed down to us as a collected treasure of our entire past--a treasure: for the value of our humanity rests upon it. From this world of ideas strict science can, in fact, release us only to a small extent (something we by no means desire), in that it is unable to break significantly the power of ancient habits of feeling. (Human, all too Human)

Origin of knowledge.- Over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species: those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny. (GS)

The Search for Truth Requires Strength

How much truth does a spirit endure, how much truth does it dare? More and more that became for me the real measure of value. Error (faith in the ideal) is not blindness, error is cowardice. Every attainment, every step forward in knowledge, follows from courage, from hardness against oneself, from cleanliness in relation to oneself. (Ecce Homo)

“the spirits of all severe, of all profoundly inclined, spirits teaches the reverse. At every step one has to wrestle for truth.” (The Antichrist)

To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment. (The Gay Science)

Experimentalism

Believers and their Need of Belief.-How much faith a person requires in order to flourish, how much "fixed opinion" he requires which he does not wish to have shaken, because he holds himself thereby-is a measure of his power (or more plainly speaking, of his weakness). (The Gay Science)

And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

But the genuine philosopher—as it seems to us, my friends?—lives “unphilosophically” and “unwisely,” above all imprudently, and feels the burden and the duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life—he risks himself constantly, he plays the wicked game— (Beyond Good and Evil)

“we ourselves wish to be our own experiments and guinea pigs.” [The Gay Science]

“To stand in the midst of this rerum concordia discors and of this whole marvelous uncertainty and interpretive multiplicity of existence and not question, not tremble with a craving and the rapture of such questioning...- That is what I feel to be contemptible.” (The Gay Science)

The Free Spirit and Skepticism

Conviction as a means: one may achieve a good deal by means of a conviction. A grand passion makes use of and uses up convictions; it does not yield to them--it knows itself to be sovereign.--On the contrary, the need of faith, of some thing unconditioned by yea or nay, of Carlylism, if I may be allowed the word, is a need of weakness. The man of faith, the "believer" of any sort, is necessarily a dependent man--such a man cannot

posit himself as a goal, nor can he find goals within himself. The "believer" does not belong to himself; he can only be a means to an end; he must be used up; he needs some one to use him up. (The Antichrist)

Have you ever seen how imprisoned criminals sleep? They sleep calmly, enjoying their new security. Beware lest a narrow faith imprison you in the end—some harsh and severe illusion. For whatever is narrow and solid seduces and tempts you now. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

“A very popular error: having the courage of one’s convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one’s convictions!”

The countless people who sacrificed themselves for their convictions thought they were doing it for absolute truth. All of them were wrong: probably no man has ever sacrificed himself for truth... It is not the struggle of opinions that has made history so violent, but rather the struggle of belief in opinions, that is, the struggle of convictions. If only all those people who thought so highly of their conviction, who sacrificed all sorts of things to it and spared neither their honor, body nor life in its service, had devoted only half of their strength to investigating by what right they clung to this or that conviction, how they had arrived at it, then how peaceable the history of mankind would appear! How much more would be known! (Human, all too Human)

The great man is necessarily a skeptic [which is not to say that he has to appear to be one], provided that greatness consists in this: to will something great and the means to it. Freedom from any kind of conviction is part of the strength of his will. Thus it accords with that “enlightened despotism” exercised by every great passion. Such a passion takes the intellect into its service; it has the courage even for unholy means; it removes scruples; it permits itself convictions, it even needs them, but it does not submit to them. The need for faith, for anything unconditional in yes and no, is a proof of weakness; all weakness is weakness of will. The

man of faith, the believer, is necessarily a small type of man. Hence “freedom of spirit,” i.e., unbelief as an instinct [is a precondition of greatness. (The Will to Power)

Beware lest a narrow faith imprison you in the end—some harsh and severe illusion. For whatever is narrow and solid seduces and tempts you now. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

One step furthering the psychology of conviction, of “faith.” It is now a good while since I first proposed for consideration the question whether convictions are not even more dangerous enemies to truth than lies. This time I desire to put the question definitely: is there any actual difference between a lie and a conviction? All the world believes that there is; but what is not believed by all the world! Every conviction has its history, its primitive forms, its stage of tentativeness and error: it becomes a conviction only after having been, for a long time, not one, and then, for an even longer time, hardly one. But if falsehood be also one of these embryonic forms of conviction? Sometimes all that is needed is a change in persons: what was a lie in the father becomes a conviction in the son. (Human all too Human)

The term “free spirit” here is not to be understood in any other sense; it means a spirit that has become free,¹ that has again taken possession of itself. (Ecce Homo)

“The free spirit a relative concept. A man is called a free spirit if he thinks otherwise than would be expected, based on his origin, environment, class, and position, or based on prevailing contemporary views. He is the exception: bound spirits are the rule;” (Human all too Human)