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The Problem of Truth

Introduction

Nietzsche’s position on truth is a subject of controversy within Nietzsche scholarship. Conflicting interpretations in the literature reflect the existence of ostensibly conflicting statements within the text. Nietzsche’s attack on the moral and intellectual culture of his time involves the claim that our beliefs instantiate errors and falsification (TI The Four Great Errors). Notions of error, illusion and deception, however, are not unambiguously negative motifs in Nietzsche’s thought (BT 25, HH I: 33, GM III: 19).

Nietzsche’s understanding of truth cannot be captured by privileging either criticisms or praise of it, which are both to be found in his writing. Interpretations that represent Nietzsche as dismissing truth fail to account for his ultimate commitment to its value. Praise for truth can be found in his early work: “love of truth is something fearsome and mighty” (UT III: 8), “knowledge of even the ugliest reality is itself beautiful” (D 550), “for this goal no sacrifice is too great” (D 45), and at the end of his productive life: “How much truth can a spirit bear, how much truth can a spirit dare? That became for me more and more the real measure of value [...] every step forward in knowledge is the result of courage” (EH Foreword: 3). It is clear from such statements that Nietzsche both values truth and believes that some form of knowledge is possible. We should not dismiss, however, the challenge that Nietzsche brings against existing understandings of truth and the seriousness of his questioning the unconditional value of truth: “we have grown sick of this bad taste, this will to truth, to ‘truth at any price’” (GS Preface: 4). Nietzsche takes seriously the question: “Granted we will truth: why not untruth instead?” (BGE 1) We need, therefore, to take account of Nietzsche’s critique of truth without representing him as rejecting truth entirely.
Nietzsche’s conflicting statements regarding truth cannot be explained away by fitting them into distinct time periods encapsulating a change in his position. Seeming contradictions in Nietzsche’s valuation of truth span his writings. To divide Nietzsche’s writings into rigid periods would be to exaggerate the rupture between the texts and overlook the continuity of themes. While his conceptual development involves a self-proclaimed break from his early embrace of Schopenhauer, the development of his understanding of truth can be understood as a gradual evolution growing out of persistent concerns. Truth, the question of its value and the form it must take in a post-Kantian world present a set of problems that Nietzsche continually returns to interrogate.

The aim of this chapter is to delineate the problematic of truth as it emerged for Nietzsche. By highlighting the presence of key themes that shaped his approach to truth, we are better placed to understand Nietzsche’s mature attitude to truth and its value. To this end, I provide an overview of Nietzsche’s early discussions of truth and some of the influences that shaped his approach to the topic. I make reference to all of Nietzsche’s early work, but, as it provides the most immediate context for the emergence of his mature philosophy, and as some boundaries must be drawn for this task, I focus primarily on the period of 1878 to 1882. To clarify the nature of these formative themes, I consider Nietzsche’s acquaintance with Kantian doctrine and, in particular, with Friedrich Lange’s uptake of the thematic of the subject’s contribution to knowledge. My aim is not to precisely evaluate Nietzsche’s conceptual relationship to Kant or Lange, or to add to the historical scholarship concerning his reading of post-Kantian philosophers. I draw on such scholarship in order to better understand how Nietzsche approached the question of truth and to emphasise the existence of certain themes that provide the framework from which Nietzsche’s own take on truth emerged.

I begin by delineating what I consider to be the key aspects of Nietzsche’s particular approach to truth, which are present from the beginning and continue to inform his mature philosophy, and I highlight that Nietzsche raises the question of truth’s value from the start. It is crucial to bear in mind that Nietzsche is always interested in this question, both to understand the textual references to truth in his work, and to make sense of his own theory of truth, which cannot coherently be extracted from the issue of its value and its cultural existence. After briefly presenting the relevant aspects of Kant’s epistemology, I discuss Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysical truth, which he associates with the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself. Nietzsche ultimately rejects the possibility of our ever having knowledge of a thing-in-itself with