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The Politics of Truth: Power in Nietzsche's Epistemology

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This article concerns first a curiosity found in Friedrich Nietzsche's The Antichrist. In the midst of a heated attack on Christianity, Nietzsche detours into a discussion of epistemology. I argue that this turn indicates the importance of epistemology, and illustrates its political and moral character. The weak, who cannot tolerate uncertainty and shades of gray, seek to impose an epistemology of clarity and certainty. At the same time, the strong, who revel in ambiguity, seek to enjoy the richness and subtlety of a non-dichotomous view of the world. This is a political struggle because the weak cannot allow the strong's epistemology to exist, let alone prevail. It is not surprising, then, that Nietzsche talks about epistemology in the midst of attacking Christianity: its view of truth is essential to its mission of taming the nobles. Here, I consider Nietzsche as a political thinker in a different light. Political battles are fought far beyond the halls of government. Nietzsche is a political thinker, one, however, who looks at politics in an uncommon way.

Nietzsche's The Antichrist is a heated attack on Christianity. From its origins in Judaism, through its struggle with Rome, and its attacks on the renaissance, Nietzsche claims that Christianity has always waged war on the strong and powerful. The priest, a figure of seething resentment and hatred for the strong, employs sin, guilt, and other concepts as weapons against the well-born and healthy. The disease-ridden and contemptible state of Western culture can be traced to the victory of Christianity. Christianity is fundamentally a religion of weakness, and The Antichrist is Nietzsche's attempt to destroy it in the name of health.

In the midst of this vitriolic attack, however, Nietzsche makes a seemingly odd move. He turns away from attacking Christian morality and instead targets the religion's epistemology. He attacks Christianity for its hatred of science: "The beginning of the Bible contains the entire psychology of the priest. — The priest knows only one great danger: that is science—the sound conception of cause and effect. . . . The concept of guilt and punishment, the entire 'moral world-order,' was invented in opposition to science" (A: 49). The change in direction is striking.

Why then does Nietzsche do this? Why does he suddenly shift targets? In this article, I argue that this shift in The Antichrist is not a diversion, but rather gets at something essential to Nietzsche's thought: epistemology is a moral issue, and therefore is a key battleground in the conflict between the strong and the weak. The question of the nature of truth is a political one; it is part of the power struggles between the few strong and well-constituted individuals and the masses of weak and ill people. Not too surprisingly, both groups have a different understanding of truth. Nietzsche argues from a symptomological point of view: the characteristics a person displays are symptoms of who that person is, of how strong his/her soul is. The ideas created by a philosopher, for example, are a reflection of that person's soul: "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir. . . . In the philosopher . . . there is nothing whatever that is impersonal" (BGE: 6). Similarly, a person's attitude towards truth reveals something of who he/she is. It makes sense that the sick and the healthy have different understandings of truth. And because the groups are in constant conflict with each other, they will war over epistemology. Victory on this front can prove decisive in the millennia-old struggle.

In this article, I explore epistemology as a political issue in Nietzsche's writings. I begin by briefly discussing Nietzsche's account of reality and our understanding of it. From there, I move on to explore the role of truth in survival: the weak need certainty and clarity if they are to avoid

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1 The German title Der Antichrist can be translated as both The Antichrist and The Anti-Christian. In this article, I follow the traditional English translation of the title, but one should keep in mind both meanings—it seems likely that the ambiguity was intentional, for Nietzsche attacks both Christ and Christians.

2 In this article, I follow the practice of Nietzsche scholarship and cite Nietzsche's texts parenthetically. Each cite includes an abbreviation of the title, along with a section number and/or name (with the exception of "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," which does not have section numbers; for that work I use page numbers). A "P" indicates Nietzsche's preface. Roman numerals indicate the essays of the Genealogy. The abbreviations are: A = The Antichrist; BGE = Beyond Good and Evil; CW = The Case of Wagner; EH = Ecce Homo; GS = The Gay Science; HH = Human, All-Too-Human; OTL = "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"; TI = Twilight of the Idols; Z = Thus Spoke Zarathustra.


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3 See also Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, "The Four Great Errors" #2: "The most general formula at the basis of every religion and morality is: 'Do this and this, refrain from this and this—and you will be happy!' . . . In my mouth this formula is converted into its reverse—first example of my 'evaluation of all values': a well-constituted human being, a 'happy one,' must perform certain actions and instinctively shrinks away from other actions."
perishing. The strong, on the other hand, thrive on ambiguity and uncertainty. The epistemology of the weak, however, is also used as a weapon. The diseased seek to force their conception of truth onto everyone in order to subvert the strong. A key part of the triumph of slave morality is an epistemological victory; without it, the strong are not truly tamed.

**The Flux of Reality**

The central idea in Nietzsche’s view of reality is that everything is fluid, in motion. To put it in philosophical terms, the nature of the world is becoming, not being. To view the world as stable and unchanging is a mistake: “The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms” (GS: 109). Heraclitus had suggested that the world is like a moving river, always changing. For this, Nietzsche praises Heraclitus, singling him out among ancient philosophers: “Heraclitus will always be right in this, that being is an empty fiction” (TI “Reason”; 2). We find Nietzsche using similar imagery in his early unpublished essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” where he describes the foundations of man’s concepts as “running water” (OTL: 85). And Zarathustra does the same: “When the water is spanned by planks, when bridges and railings leap over the river, verily, those are not believed who say, ‘Everything is in flux.’ Even the blockheads contradict them. . . . O my brothers, is not everything in flux now? Have not all railings and bridges fallen into the water?” (Z “On Old and New Tablets”: 8; cf. “Upon the Blessed Isles”).

A consequence of the fluctuating character of reality is that all events and phenomena are unique: “there neither are nor can be actions that are the same . . . every action that has ever been done was done in an altogether unique and irretrievable way; and that this will be equally true of every future action” (GS: 339). This is particularly true of our deeds and perceptions, because each of us is a different individual: “Fundamentally, all our actions are altogether incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual; there is no doubt of that” (GS: 354). An example that Nietzsche uses is leaves. All leaves, if we look carefully, are different—they have variations (sometimes slight, sometimes significant) in color, size, texture, and shape (OTL: 83). To call them all by the same name—“leaf”—is thus a falsification and simplification of reality.

Nietzsche also claims that reality is quite likely to be dangerous: “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 know it completely would perish” (BGE: 39). For this reason, we often lack the courage to seek truth (TI “Maxims”: 2). The case of Hamlet is illustrative. Hamlet has seen into the depths of reality and is paralyzed by the horror that this knowledge brings: “Is Hamlet understood? Not doubt, certainty is what drives one insane.—But one must be profound, an abyss, a philosopher to feel that way.—We are all afraid of truth” (EH “Clever”. 4). In this sense, Nietzsche is quite the opposite of a pragmatist: truth is not what is useful and beneficial, for truth is often harmful.

Given the fluctuating and unique character of reality, it should be no surprise that Nietzsche thinks that concepts and ideas are artificially imposed on the world. Unchanging truths and stable ideas are falsifications. When we posit natural laws and explanations, we are merely anthropomorphizing nature: “It will do to consider science as an attempt to humanize things as faithfully as possible” (GS: 112; cf. BGE: 14). This is particularly true of our most basic concepts of the world. “It is we alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed ‘in itself,’ we act once more as we have always acted—mythologically” (BGE: 21). Even philosophers are guilty of this. Kant, for example, invented the faculty which made synthetic judgments a priori possible, but assumed that he had discovered it. Other philosophers followed in his wake, inventing their own faculties (BGE: 11).

This point is explored at length in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.” In that essay, Nietzsche argues that concepts are metaphors which do not correspond to reality: “A word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things” (OTL: 83). Concepts are originally created by common agreement—a “peace treaty” among people (OTL p. 81)—to allow for easy communication. But after we create concepts, we forget that they are our own inventions, and come to believe that they are simply true. Therefore, truths are merely things we have agreed to call true; to speak truly means to use correctly and consistently the metaphors we have created. In a famous passage, Nietzsche writes that truth is a “movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” (OTL: 84). Concepts are not real; they are human creations, foisted upon the world. ⁶

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⁴ Nietzsche makes a similar point in Birth of Tragedy: section 7 “In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action. . . . Knowledge kills action; action requires the veil of illusion.”

⁵ Arthur Danto (1965: 72) is perhaps the most prominent scholar who argues that Nietzsche has a pragmatic view of truth. Although Danto does recognize non-pragmatic tendencies in Nietzsche, he sees a pragmatic notion of truth.

⁶ Given these quotations, it is not surprising that “On Truth and Lies” has exercised significant influence over views of Nietzsche, particularly among postmodern scholars.
CERTAINTY AND STABILITY: 
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF WEAKNESS

So far, I have briefly covered Nietzsche's account of the nature of truth and our relationship to it. Yet the key question has not been addressed: why do we view the world as we do? What are the origins of our epistemological systems? In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (1974) makes an arresting claim: “How far the moral sphere extends.—As soon as we see a new image, we immediately construct it with the aid of all our previous experiences, depending on the degree of our honesty and justice. All experiences are moral experiences, even in the realm of sense perception” (GS: 114). Epistemology, then, is a moral undertaking. It is not the objective and disinterested study of how we know; it is rather a moral decision shaped by one’s interests and objective. A group’s epistemology acts as an indicator of who they are. Epistemology is a moral matter, which means that it is a sign of the character of the group: “it [moral judgment] reveals, to the informed man at least, the most precious realities of cultures and inner worlds which did not know enough to ‘understand’ themselves. Morality is merely a sign-language, merely symptomatology” (TI “Improvers”: 1). Our notion of truth is rooted in who we are.

Nietzsche (TI “Expeditions” 33) argues, to put it crudely, that there are two types of human beings, the strong and the weak: “Every individual may be regarded as representing the ascending or descending line of life” 7 What separates them is the level of power they possess. By “strong” and “weak,” Nietzsche does not mean physical ability; rather, he uses the terms as measures of spiritual power. The will to power is the fundamental driving force of all life (Z “On Self-Overcoming”; BGE: 13), but some individuals have more power than others. At the lower end of the scale, we find the weak, those who seek power but cannot attain at. At the top of the scale are great spirits who turn their power inward and seek to master themselves. The two groups have different interests and values based on their differing levels of power. In the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, for example, Nietzsche (1967) describes the two radically different moral codes created by the strong and the weak, master morality and slave morality. Each serves the interests of a different type of person; each originates from a different level of strength. We should not be surprised, then, that there are different epistemological systems produced by the two groups.

The epistemology of the sick is based on their weakness. The majority of people find mere survival very difficult. Nietzsche tells us that humans are much weaker than the other animals, and therefore face a dangerous existence. To combat this, the weak adopt an epistemology of certainty and constancy. In two different ways, certainty of concepts and ideas is essential to survival. First, people must be able
to make quick decisions to persist. As noted above, Nietzsche argues that phenomena in the world are unique; we impose concepts on dissimilar objects. A key reason we do this is so that we can act quickly. If we can rapidly label things (as, for example, “dangerous” or “beneficial”) we can take appropriate action (fleeing from danger, seeking out benefits) without hesitation. This is a tremendous advantage for survival: “it was likewise necessary that for a long time one did not see nor perceive the changes in things. The beings that did not see so precisely had an advantage over those who saw everything in ‘flux.’ At bottom, every high degree of caution in making inference and every skeptical tendency constitute a great danger for life” (GS: 111). Delaying judgment can be fatal. If I carefully study an approaching animal to gain insight into what it is, the animal could easily kill me before I have a chance to flee. It is more advantageous for me to make a quick decision. Therefore, it is in my interest to see the world in terms of concepts and ideas, not in terms of the uniqueness of each thing.

A second tactic that the weak use to promote their survival is cooperation. This is the origin of the herd that Nietzsche speaks about frequently. Since it is difficult for individuals to survive, they can help themselves by working together: “As the most endangered animal, he [man] needed help and protection, he needed his peers” (GS: 354). But mutual assistance requires an epistemological foundation. If we are to work together, we must be able to understand each other: “The greater the danger is, the greater is the need to reach agreement quickly and easily about what must be done; not misunderstanding each other in times of danger is what human beings simply cannot do without in their relations” (BGE: 268). To understand each other, we must have the same concepts. There cannot be disagreement or debate about the basic concepts, or communication will fail: "To understand one another, it is not enough that one uses the same words; one also has to use the same words for the same species of inner experiences; in the end one has to have one’s experience in common" (BGE: 268). The imposition of false concepts onto the world serves the need of the weak, therefore, by allowing for quick communication between people.

An epistemology of certain and clear concepts also serves a psychological need of the ill. The flux of the world is frightening to them. Certain and clear concepts allow the sick some hope: they find the order and stability reassuring. Thus, many of our thought patterns provide us with comfort. Logic, for example, convinces us that the world is predictable and orderly: “logic calms and gives confidence” (GS 370). We are comforted by the thought that the world has stability.

The weak, therefore, benefit from having an epistemology of certainty and stability: “How much one needs a faith in order to flourish, how much that is ‘firm’ and that one does not wish to be shaken because one clings to it, that is a measure of the degree of one’s strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one’s weakness)” (GS: 347). To them, the truth is what is clear and distinct, to use Descartes’ terminology. The weak insist that this is truth, but in fact this is

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7 This is of course a simplification: the reality is that strength and weakness intermingle in a variety of ways in many individuals. On this point, see my articles (2001b: 100-17; 2001a: 129-58).
merely an expression of their will to dominate and control the world:

“Will to truth,” you who are wisest call that which impels you and fills you with lust? A will to the thinkability of all beings: this I call your will. You want to make all being thinkable, for you doubt with well-founded suspicion that it is already thinkable. But it shall yield and bend for you. It shall become smooth and serve the spirit as its mirror and reflection. That is your whole will, you who are wisest: a will to power. (Z “On Self-Overcoming”)

The imposition of categories onto reality is a result of the ill-constituted desire to dominate the world and make it safer for them. After a time, we come to forget the dishonest origin of our concepts because they are so useful; they become second nature to us (GS 110). The epistemological system created out of weakness is assumed by most to be simply true.

Understanding the world as an unchanging environment with regular ground rules makes the infirm’s survival easier. These concepts are false, but that does not make them useless. It is for this reason that Nietzsche argues that falseness and utility are not mutually exclusive ideas: “The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment. . . . And we are fundamentally inclined to claim that the false judgments . . . are the most indispensable for us” (BGE: 4).9 Falsity is a very useful tool: “As a means for preserving the individual, the intellect unfolds its principle power in dissimulation, which is the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves” (OTL: 80). When discussing Kant’s attempt to prove that synthetic judgments a priori are possible, Nietzsche argues that Kant asks the wrong question: “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, for the sake of preservation of creatures like ourselves” (BGE: 11). The ideas that most people have are useful to them, but that does not make them true.

An excellent example of the flawed but useful thinking adopted by the weak is what has been called binary or oppositional thinking.9 Many people, whether they realize it or not, bifurcate the world into two distinct categories when judging. The categories are comprehensive (all phenomena fit into a category) and mutually exclusive (no phenomenon can fit in both categories). When interpreting the world, people filter all information through these categories. Such thinking is particularly prominent in morality. Not surprisingly, then, perhaps the most common example of binary thinking is the categories “good” and “evil.”10 Every phenomenon under consideration must be placed into one of these categories. For example, murder is taken to be simply evil by many, while charity is wholly good. Such thinking is sharply dichotomous; something must be either in one category or the other. Some forms of Christianity, for example, argue that either one is a Christian (and therefore good) or one is heretic (and therefore evil). This mode of thinking is extremely prevalent; not only common people, but philosophers of all types engage in this mode of thought. According to Nietzsche, “[t]he fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the faith in opposite values” (BGE: 2; cf. HH: 1).

The problem is that, according to Nietzsche, opposite values do not exist: “Historical philosophy, on the other hand . . . has discovered in individual cases (and this will probably be the result in every case) that there are no opposites” (HH: 1). Instead, opposite values are an intellectual framework created by the mind to simplify reality, and as a result, the framework does not do justice to reality. The rich details and vast subtleties of the world cannot fit into two starkly separate categories. To make matters worse, people who think in this manner do not realize what they are doing; they simply assume, without any questioning, that the world really is divided into two discreet categories. This is why Nietzsche frequently refers to Glaube11 in opposite values—people believe that opposites exist, without any basis in reality. To say, therefore, that something is simply good or evil is to do violence to reality.

As with other impositions of concepts, dichotomies ignore the richness of existence. Instead of looking for opposites, for black and white, we must learn to look for the subtle blending of colors, for shades of gray, for the mingling of different (and seemingly opposite) characteristics: “Indeed, what forces us at all to suppose that there is an essential opposition of ‘true’ and ‘false’? Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness, and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance—different ‘values,’ to use the language of painters?” (BGE: 34; cf. BGE: 2). The world is much more nuanced and much richer than binary thinking would allow, and to use such patterns of thought represents an intellectual prejudice. But it is a prejudice that allows for rapid decisionmaking and ease of communication. If something is labeled “evil,” one does not have to deliberate about whether to flee, or argue with another over what “evil” means.

The demand for certainty and clarity is perhaps best embodied in the ascetic ideal. In the third essay of On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche argues that the ascetic ideal, a belief in another heavenly realm which provides all meaning and value to this world, is at the core of Christianity and other movements of illness. A key component of the ascetic ideal is an unconditional faith in truth:

That which constrains these men, however, the unconditional will to truth, is faith in the ascetic ideal itself, even if

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8 This point also conflicts with the pragmatic reading of Nietzsche’s epistemology according to pragmatism, what is useful is what is true.
9 For a good account of this, see Alan Schrift (1989: 783-90).
10 This is one meaning of Nietzsche’s expression “beyond good and evil”: he is rejecting binary thinking as a simplification of reality.
11 The German term Glaube can be translated as either “faith” or “belief;” there are not separate German words for faith and belief.
as an unconscious imperative—don't be deceived about
that—it is the faith in a **metaphysical** value, the absolute
value of **truth**, sanctioned and guaranteed by this ideal
alone (it stands or falls with this ideal). (GM III: 24)

The best example of this is the Christian statement that "you
shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The
sick need to believe in a realm better than earth, for they
cannot find happiness here. And they must believe that the
other realm is the source of all good things, including truth.
The unconditional will to truth is part of the core belief
system that sustains the weak.

The will to truth contained in the ascetic ideal is, how-
ever, paradoxically based on error or deception. The core of
the ascetic ideal is a belief in another world, a heavenly
realm (GM III: 11). But no such other world exists; all heav-
enly realms are fictions. Therefore, the will to truth (which
is also rooted in faith in another world) is built on a false-
hood. Nietzsche discusses this issue in the first few sections
of **Beyond Good and Evil** as well as in book five of **The Gay
Science**. The will to truth is valued by the weak not because
the truth exists and is beneficial, but rather because they
need to believe in truth. The certainty and clarity provided
by the will to truth provide comfort to the ill-constituted.

Faith in truth helps them endure. 13

The epistemology of the sick, then, is rooted in their
weakness. In a harsh world, they need to believe in truth as
certainty and clarity. It allows them to make quick judg-
ments, work together, and feel somewhat secure and com-
forted. This epistemological system is thus based on the
needs of a certain kind of person. It serves their interests.
Truth is a tool for survival.

**Skepticism and Ambiguity: the Epistemology of Strength**

The epistemology of the strong, on the other hand,
thrives on uncertainty and change. The strong are more
capable of surviving in a hostile world, and therefore do
not need certainty and stability to get by: "one could con-
ceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination,
such a freedom of the will that the spirit would take leave of
all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in
maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities
and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the
**free spirit par excellence**" (GS 347). Powerful humans do
not need the crutches of certainty. Indeed, they disdain
unchanging truths: "Convictions are prisons. . . . A spirit
which wants to do great things, which also wills the means

for it, is necessarily a skeptic. Freedom from convictions of
any kind, the **capacity** for an unconstrained view, pertains to
strength" (A: 54; cf. HH: 483).

The strong, then, are truthful in that they acknowledge
the fluctuating character of the world. 14 Zarathustra calls
honesty "the youngest among the virtues" because the dom-
inance of the weak has encouraged dishonesty; honesty only
appears in a few rare individuals (Z "On the Afterworldly";
cf. GS: 2). And Nietzsche praises two great men for their
intellectual conscience: he refers to Napoleon as one of "the
greatest of factual men" (EH "Clever": 3) and writes that
Goethe was "in an epoch disposed to the unreal, a con-
vinced realist" (TI "Expeditions": 49). The well-constituted
do not shy away from the fluctuating character of reality.

In **Beyond Good and Evil** section 39, Nietzsche writes that
exposure to truth is a test of one's strength: "Indeed, it might
be a basic characteristic of existence that those who 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." The strong seek out
challenges for they relish the chance to prove themselves (Z
"On War and Warriors": GM I: 10). Truth is such a chal-
lenge, so the strong do not hide behind certainty and stabil-
ity. They cultivate danger by asking difficult questions,
refusing to accept an answer simply because it is convenient
or comfortable:

The proof by 'pleasure' is a proof of pleasure—that is all;
when on earth was it established that true judgments give
more enjoyment than false ones and, in accordance with a
predetermined harmony, necessarily bring pleasant
feelings in their train?—The experience of all severe, all
profound intellects teaches the reverse. Truth has had to
be fought for every step of the way, almost everything
else dear to our hearts, on which our love and our trust
in life depend, has had to be sacrificed to it. Greatness of
soul is needed for it: the service of truth is the hardest
service (A: 50).

Testing oneself against the flux of reality is a sign of health.
It is not that the nature of reality is less frightening for
the strong. Instead, the powerful have the courage to face
the truth. 15 One could argue that the nature of reality poses
more danger for the strong than for the weak, for they are
much more likely to look into abysses and be affected by
them. But the healthy have the ability to look into abysses
and not turn away from life; they affirm life despite ugly
and painful truths. This is Nietzsche's definition of a
Dionysian person. He describes Zarathustra as embodying

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12 From the Gospel of John, 8: 32. This version of the passage is taken from
the New International Version translation.

13 This of course leads to great problems for the ascetic ideal: the will to
truth eventually calls everything into question, including belief in God
and the afterworld. This is a dangerous, perhaps fatal, consequence of
the ascetic ideal—it destroys itself and brings nihilism. Nietzsche makes
this argument at the end of the third essay of the Genealogy.

14 This parallels Nietzsche's description of the masters in the first essay of
the Genealogy as truthful (GM I: 9, 11).

15 At the start of book five of The Gay Science, Nietzsche quotes the
Vicomte de Turenne to illustrate his definition of courage: "You tremble,
carcass? You would tremble a lot more if you knew where I am taking
you." Courage is not ignorance of danger, nor is it lack of fear. Courage
is controlling one's fear, recognizing the hazard and acting anyway.
the Dionysian concept: "he that has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the 'most abysmal thought,' nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence, not even to its eternal recurrence—but rather one more reason for being himself the eternal Yes to all things. . . . But this is the concept of Dionysus once again" (EH, Z: 6; cf. T1 "Ancients": 5). It is a sign of one's spiritual height that one can see reality for what it is and not seek to flee from life.

As a result, the powerful relish the ambiguity of the world: "All the permanent—that is only a parable. And the poets lie too much. It is of time and becoming that the best parables should speak: let them be a praise and a justification of all impermanence" (Z "Upon the Blessed Isles"). The strong reject all categories and wrestle with truth as a joyful game: "Objections, digressions, gay mistrust, the delight in mockery are signs of health: everything unconditional belongs in pathology" (BGE: 154). It is in bad taste for anyone to adopt categories: "Above all, one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity: that is a dictate of good taste, gentlemen" (GS: 373). Because of this, Nietzsche refers to the philosophers of the future as "philosophers of the dangerous 'maybe' in every sense" (BGE: 2) and he advises that "there might be a more laudable truthfulness in every little question mark that you place after your special words and favorite doctrines (and occasionally after yourselves) than in all solemn gestures and trumpets before accusers and law courts" (BGE: 25). The powerful are playful; they challenge presuppositions, question fundamental values, and redefine truth itself as part of their display of potency.

It is important to note that Nietzsche, by offering different versions of truth and how we know it, is not saying that there is no such thing as truth, or that we cannot know the truth. On this point, I disagree with postmodern readings, which frequently center on perspectivism. Nietzsche is quite clear that there is a truth. In the Genealogy, for example, he writes of harsh and unpleasant truths, "[f]or such truths do exist" (GM I: 1). In Ecce Homo he refers to his struggle against Christianity as a case where "truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia" (EH "Destiny": 1) In The Antichrist, he calls on nature as a standard of truth when he writes that: "[n]ature, not Manu [a Hindu law-giver], separates from one another the different types of human being (A: 57). Truth is rooted in the will to power, which underlies everything. Truths may vary from person to person, but each person's truths derive from his/her level of power. On this issue, I agree with Daniel Ahern, who writes that

What distinguishes Nietzsche from deconstruction, however, is that in spite of his pointing to the multiplicity of interpretations, he sees them all betray the symptomatic codes of sickness and health. For him, interpretation is the sign language, not of the eternal truths of metaphysics, but of the concrete events of the body as will to power.

Nietzsche rejects traditional notions of truth, but this does not mean that he rejects truth entirely.

**The Politics of Truth**

So far I have argued that in Nietzsche's view different groups of people will have different epistemological systems. What is useful for one group is not useful for the other. But Nietzsche goes farther than this: what is beneficial to one group is actually harmful to the other (BGE 30). The Genealogy powerfully makes this point in the realm of morals: master morality is dangerous to the weak slaves because it encourages aggression and danger-seeking, while slave morality hurts the masters by undercutting their individualism and puissance. Therefore, the moral codes conflict. Epistemology is no different. The epistemology of the sick contradicts that of the healthy. This is obvious in that the former stresses the unchanging nature of reality, while the former encourages ambiguity and questioning.

But this is not just an academic dispute about which system is correct; it is a political one. The weak need to impose their epistemological system on the strong in order to protect themselves. As noted above, the weak need a belief in regularity and clarity to help them survive (through

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16 This is the interpretation adopted by most postmodern readings of Nietzsche. Jacques Derrida (1979: 55), for example, writes that truth is indeterminate: "Woman (truth) will not be pinned down." See also Gilles Deleuze's Nietzsche and Philosophy (translated by Hugh Tomlinson; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), as well as "Nomad Thoughts," in The New Nietzsche (edited by David Allison; New York: Delta, 1977, pp. 142-149); Arthur Danto's Nietzsche as Philosopher, and Alexander Nehamas' Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

17 This does not mean that I ignore or overlook Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism (which is the center of Nehamas' interpretation). One's perspective on life changes what one sees, but it does not change the basic fact that life is will to power.
quick action and communication). Anyone who undermines those beliefs is therefore a danger, an enemy who is undermining the herd's ability to get by. To prevent such people from bringing risk, the weak seek to impose their epistemology on everyone, including the strong. Therefore, epistemology becomes a weapon in the hands of weak.

We see this in a number of ways. First, weak thinkers who articulate epistemological systems shun change: "You ask me about the idiosyncrasies of philosophers? . . . There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think they are doing a thing an honor when they dehistoricize it, sub specie aeterni—when they make a mummy of it" (TI "Reason" 1). Because sense perception tells us that the world is in constant motion, weak thinkers reject the senses, calling them deceptive and misleading. They then posit a "real world" which is unchanging and eternal, and which is better and truer than the "apparent world" our senses perceive. 21 Nietzsche writes that philosophy is "the most spiritual will to power" (BGE 9), so when thinkers posit epistemologies of certainty, they are engaged in indirect political action.

Plato is an excellent example of this from Nietzsche's point of view. Plato stands as a crucial figure in the history of the West because of his "invention of the pure spirit and the good as such" (BGE P). Plato posited a higher reality than the physical world, and argued that truth was eternal and constant. Although Plato was not pure rabble, he was seduced by Socrates' plebeian character and sought to make something noble out of Socrates' teachings. But what he made was merely a more sophisticated version of Socrates' plebeian ideas (BGE 190-191). For despite his nobility and power, Plato had a weak soul: "Plato is a coward in the face of reality—consequently he flees into the ideal" (TI "Ancients" 2). Plato's forms stand as an archetype of permanent and certain truth—they are a clear example of weak epistemology.

The weak go further than this, though. They create a moral code which views skepticism and doubt as sinful. The root of Christianity (the most complete incarnation of the values of weakness) is faith; to question this faith is dangerous. The priests (leaders and symbols of the sickly) strongly criticize those who refuse to adopt their way of viewing the world. In "On the Flies in the Marketplace," Zarathustra says that "from you too they [the flies, the mass of ordinary people] want a Yes or No," and the people will sting the would-be higher man to force compliance. The person who undermines certainty and permanence by asking questions and raising doubts is dangerous; the fate of Galileo is but one example of the sick's inability to tolerate challenge to their beliefs.

The demand that all obey morality, and that morality itself not be questioned, is an example of this. A central claim of slave morality is that it is universal—all must obey its dictates, regardless of who they are:

Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality—in other words, as we understand it, merely one type of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other types, above all higher moralities, are, or ought to be, possible. But this morality resists such a "possibility," such an "ought" with all its power: it says stubbornly and inexorably "I am morality itself, and nothing besides is morality." (BGE 202; cf. GM III 23) 22

This is an epistemological claim: the rules of conduct are true and universal, and therefore apply to everyone. Those who raise questions about morality are evil. One is not allowed to see morality as a problem (BGE 186).

Nietzsche notes that the greatest moral triumph of the slaves was to convince the masters that slave morality is simply true: if the masters accept slave morality, they do not have to be forced to obey its dictates. Instead, they obey out of their own inclinations, turning away from their powerful souls. The same is true of the epistemology of the slaves. The weak create a culture that discourages skepticism: "Thinking in a way that is not customary is much less the result of superior intellect than it is the result of strong, evil inclinations that detach and isolate one, and that are defiant, nasty, and malicious" (GS 35). When independent spirits come to believe this, it makes it much harder for them to ask their dangerous questions. The herd instinct infects even the strongest (GS 50). Zarathustra's advice to would-be higher men demonstrates this: "He who seeks, easily gets lost. All loneliness is guilt—thus speaks the herd. And you have long belonged to the herd. The voice of the herd will still be audible in you. And when you say, 'I will no longer have a common conscience with you,' it will be a lament and agony" (Z "On the Way of the Creator"). Breaking away from the herd is very difficult; one feels a traitor. This feeling of isolation and despair eventually kills the high aspirations of even Zarathustra's disciples, who "become pious again" because they grew weary and lonely (Z "On Apostates" 1).

The epistemology of the slaves is rooted above all in falsehood. This is not the falsehood of ignorance or error, but of lying. In The Antichrist, Nietzsche discusses lying at length. He defines lying as "wanting not to see something one does see" (A 55). This is what he accuses Christianity, as well as other forms of slave morality, of doing: "In Christianity, the art of holy lying, the whole of Judaism, a schooling and technique pursued with the utmost seriousness for hundreds of years, attains its ultimate perfection" (A 44). 23 The priests lied when they wrote the Gospels; the so-called books of innocence are replete with deception and manipulation. Priests are also called inveterate liars in the first essay.

21 This closely parallels the belief in an afterlife in morality: the weak cannot tolerate life in this world, so they invent another world in which they will be happy. See, e.g., "On the Afterworldly" in Zarathustra and section 11 of the third essay of the Genealogy of Morals.

22 According to Alexander Nehamas, this is the core of Nietzsche's critique of slave values. Nehamas contends that Nietzsche's perspectivism means that he is not advocating a new moral code, and therefore he condemns slave values and the ascetic ideal for their universalism, not for their content. See Nehamas' Nietzsche: Life as Literature, especially chapter 7.

23 Nietzsche also takes Plato to task on this issue, for Plato's use of the "noble lie" in the Republic.
of the *Genealogy*. Because lying is about not seeing what one wants to see, Nietzsche is clear that at least the priests do see the nature of things. They lie intentionally in order to protect their beliefs and their power.\(^{24}\) They are not simply mistaken about things. They are deceivers, intentionally perpetrating a fraud on themselves and others.

It is for this reason that Nietzsche writes that the priests hate and fear science. Science could destroy what the priest has created, could bring down his epistemological system which, deep down, he knows to be false. Nietzsche interprets the story of the fall in the Book of Genesis as an expression of this fear: "Moral: science is the forbidden in itself—it alone is forbidden. Science is the first sin, the germ of all sins, original sin. This alone constitutes morality—'Thou shalt not know'—the rest follows" (A 48). This fear of science was one reason for the Christian attempt to destroy the Roman empire. The Romans possessed the tools of science, and this fueled Christian hatred of them:

Every prerequisite for an erudite culture, all the scientific methods were already there, the great, the incomparable art of reading well had already been established—the prerequisite for a cultural tradition, for a uniform science; natural science, in concert with mathematics and mechanics, was on the best possible road—the sense for facts, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses, had its schools and its tradition already centuries old! (A 59)

When Christianity brought down the noble values of Rome, it also destroyed the foundations for science.

Thus, we should not be surprised that Nietzsche turns to science in the midst of his criticism of Christian values. Epistemology is a battleground in the struggle between weak and strong. The weak need the strong to accept slave values if they are to thrive. One of these values is the epistemology of certainty and stability. The sick benefit from the healthy accepting these categories. Therefore, they engage in political struggle over the issue. Epistemological struggle is part of the "great politics" waged by the slaves.\(^{25}\)

And the struggle of the weak has been very successful. In the moral realm, Nietzsche frequently writes that the illnesses of the plebeians have infected the vast majority of society, including many with powerful souls: "wherever the ascetic priest has prevailed with this treatment, sickness has spread in depth and breadth with an astonishing speed" (GM III 21). Nietzsche says that he too is infected by this illness: "I am, no less than Wagner, a child of this time; that is, a decadent" (CW P; cf. EH "Wise" 1). We see the same problem with epistemology: even the strongest are infected by the belief in absolute truth. In a striking passage, Nietzsche writes that he and his kind are "still pious":

But you will have gathered what I am driving at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests—that even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is truth, that truth is divine. (GS 344; cf. BGE 64)

The politics of truth waged by the infirm has been very successful, infecting even the mightiest. And if such people accept the epistemology of weakness, then perhaps the strong have been completely defeated.

**Conclusion**

In this account of Nietzsche's philosophy, epistemology appears in a different light—it is not merely the study of what truth is, of how we know the world. Instead, it is a political battleground. The strong nobles and the weak slaves engage in a struggle over what shall count as truth, and victory in this battle can be decisive: if the strong come to believe the weak version of truth, then they are abandoning a key element of their power. Nietzsche departs from traditional philosophy by portraying epistemology in this way. Peter Berkowitz takes issue with much Nietzsche scholarship when he writes that "Nietzsche's fundamental concern with ethical and political questions is obscured when scholars make him over into a theorist primarily concerned with questions of how we know rather than how we should live."\(^{26}\) I think that Berkowitz is right to some extent, but he fails to see that questions of epistemology are questions of how we should live. Epistemology is moral undertaking.

The fact that epistemology is political also shows Nietzsche's significance as a political thinker. He breaks away from traditional approaches to politics by uncovering struggles many people do not see. Politics is not simply what transpires in the halls of government or in meetings of diplomats. It is much broader, reflecting the omnipresent struggle between illness and health which has dominated the history of the West (GM I 16). Nietzsche argues that the most significant events are not what we often think they are, namely, wars, treaties, and the creation of legislation. Instead, the greatest events are the creation of values (Z "On Great Events;" cf. Z "On the Flies in the Marketplace" and BGE 285). Therefore, most of what we think of as politics is rather petty and minor; truly great politics are the battles over values and ideas. At times

\(^{24}\) In section 55 of *The Antichrist* Nietzsche also notes that "the most common lie is the lie one tells to oneself," which suggests that the priests (and others) may not be conscious of what they are doing. They still are aware, however, at some level. Nietzsche is clear that they do not mislead because of ignorance.

\(^{25}\) In section eight of the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche writes that the effort to subvert master morality was part of "the secret black art of truly große Politik." Kaufmann here translates "große Politik" as "grand politics." I prefer the term "great politics" to match up with common translations of other passages, most notably section one of the chapter "Why I am a Destiny" in *Ecce Homo*.

\(^{26}\) Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: the Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 3.
Nietzsche does not seem like a political thinker at all because he does not discuss the best regime or details of what a good society would be. But this is the point: Nietzsche is attempting to redefine politics, to move beyond the narrow realm of the state and see the important struggles occurring quietly and, at times, invisibly.

This article also points to the tenuousness of Nietzsche’s project. Nietzsche seeks to bring down slave morality in all its forms and replace it with a healthier moral system that will nurture and encourage great individuals. But, as noted above, Nietzsche sees himself and others like him as infected with the values of the age. How can someone complicit in the disease of the day create a new health? How can someone who is “still pious” (GS 344) bring down the epistemology of illness? At the very least, examining Nietzsche’s account of the politics of truth shows the risk involved and the tenuousness of success. Nietzsche’s project may be unattainable, as he himself sometimes feared (Z P 5; BGE 203). Revaluing values, including epistemological ones, is a dangerous and uncertain goal.

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27 Daniel Conway has argued exactly this: “Modernity, he now believes, is an age beset by advanced decay, which can be neither reversed nor arrested” (Nietzsche’s Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 2). Instead, he argues, Nietzsche writes to save as much of the will as possible, so that a later age may be able to do what this age could not. In my article “The Great Health,” I take issue with this position: I argue that although success is not assured, and will require tremendous struggle, it is nevertheless possible.

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