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Beyond Good and Bad Theories of Knowledge: Genealogy, Truth-seeking, and Relations of Causality in Nietzsche and Foucault

Barré, François

Citation

Barré, F. (2022). *Beyond Good and Bad Theories of Knowledge: Genealogy, Truth-seeking, and Relations of Causality in Nietzsche and Foucault*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Beyond Good and Bad Theories of Knowledge:

Genealogy, Truth-seeking, and Relations of Causality in Nietzsche and Foucault

François Barré

S2534215

Bachelor Thesis

Dr. Matthew B. Longo

June 14th, 2022

Wordcount: 8967

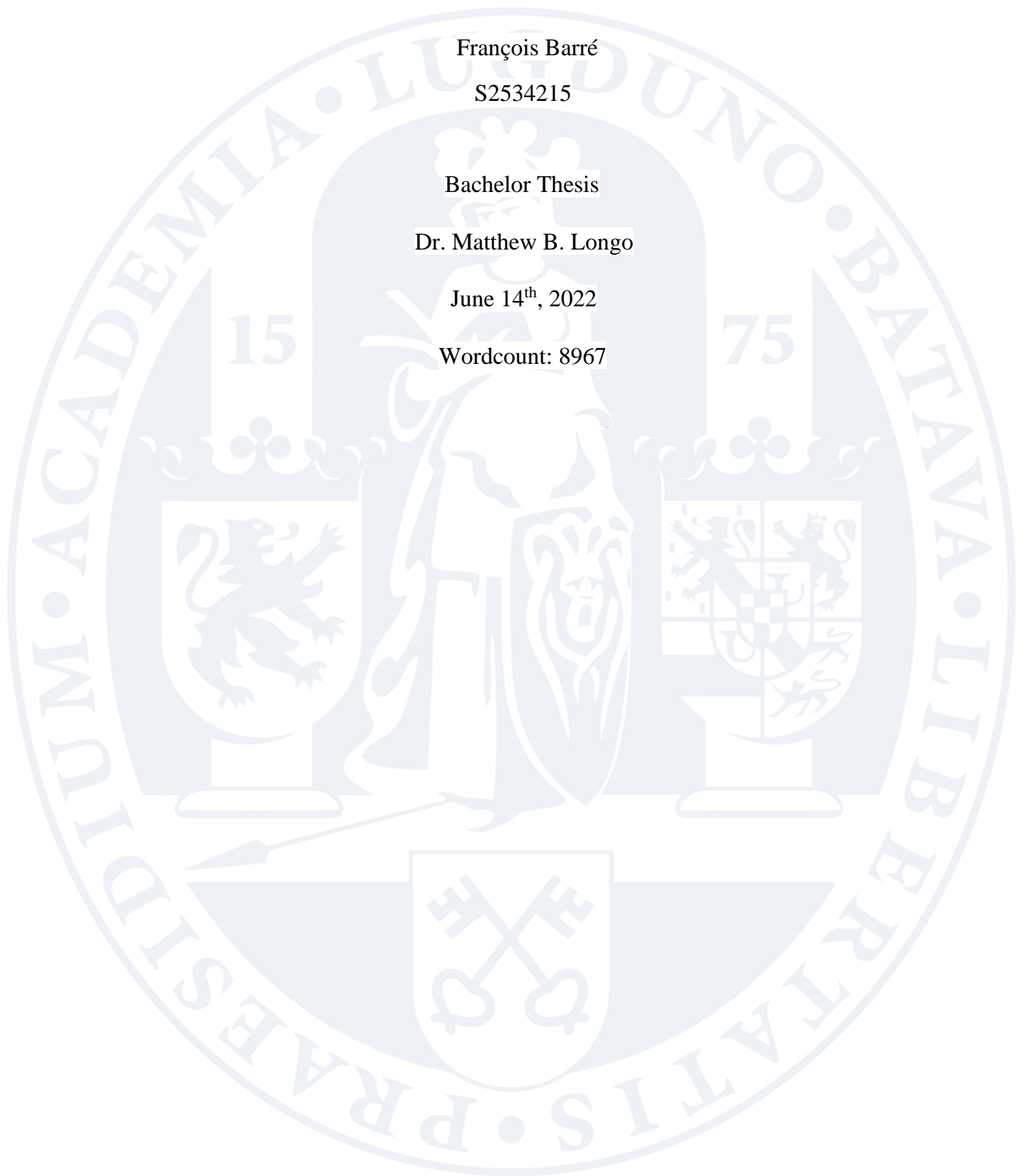


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ABBREVIATIONS¹:

AC	<i>The Antichrist</i>
BGE	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
BT	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
EH	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
GM	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>
GS	<i>The Gay Science</i>
HAH	<i>Human, All-to-Human</i>
OTL	<i>On Truths and Lies in a Non-moral Sense</i>
WP	<i>The Will to Power</i>
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
M	<i>Metaphysics</i> (Aristotle)
NGH	<i>Nietzsche, Genealogy, History</i> (Foucault)
SAP	<i>The Subject and Power</i> (Foucault)

¹ In-text citation format for these classical works: (Author, Abbreviation of cited work: Section, page number)

“Supposing truth is a woman – what then?”

(Nietzsche, BGE:P, 2)

I. *The Question of Value of Truth-seeking*

Closing *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche asked an essential question as it pertains to our philosophical inquiries: “what is the meaning of all will to truth?” or, more specifically, what would it mean for us if “the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a problem” (GMIII:26, 161)? The problem he had established then was that

“[scholars] themselves embody [the ascetic ideal] today and perhaps they alone; they themselves are its most spiritualized product, its most advanced and front-line troops and scouts, its most captious, tender, intangible form of seduction [...] They are far from being *free* spirits: *for they still have faith in truth*” (Nietzsche, GMIII:24, 150).

There, Nietzsche outlined the problem Science inherited from Christianity: The ascetic ideal and its sacred “will-to-truth” had turned Man’s “will-to-power” against his own animal instincts by designating the pursuit of eternal truths as of higher value. Rejecting interpretation for the sake of objectiveness, Science’s factualist dogma paralleled religious promises of an otherworldly horizon only attained through principles detached from the corporeal life and its aesthetic needs (Nietzsche, GMIII:24, 151).

Following up on Nietzsche’s question, Foucault appropriates himself the genealogical method to inquire the purposes of truth-seeking. The answer he finds is such:

“The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth) and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind)” (Foucault, NGH, 163).

Thus, Foucault arrived at the conclusion that the notion of truth itself was a vector of power: by delineating individuals’ subjectivities, all truth-claims belied a link to oppression. Bounded by power relations, Nietzsche’s perspectival interpretations could never hope to escape external determination to create originally. Therefore, to liberate ourselves from its toll on our “bodies and souls,” truth had to be challenged as a historically-laden concept, detached from its presupposed empirical validity.

Contentiously, while Foucault's indebtedness to Nietzsche is evident, the German philosopher campaigns both *for* and *against* truth across his work. At times, the value of truth and its pursuit, or even its very existence, is called into question by Nietzsche:

“No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to "truth at any price," this youthful madness in the love of truth – have lost their charm for us.” (GS:P:4, 38).

“[T]here are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.” (HAH:2, 13).

Yet, Nietzsche also irreducibly appeals to truth to defeat the set of arbitrary beliefs he is battling with, and thus poses truth as worth pursuing for itself:

“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” (AC:50, 179).

Furthermore, the value of truth-seeking appears to follow an asymmetrical design where “[w]hat serves the higher type of man as food or refreshment must to a very different and inferior type be almost poison,” while Nietzsche also describes “untruth as a condition of life” (BGE:30, 61; BGE:4, 36). Thus, whereas Foucault demands the dismantling of truth as an invalidated concept, if truth-seeking is to have any value for Nietzsche, its pursuit is likely to be compounded to a certain set of individuals, ends, and boundaries. Given the apparent contrast between the two scholars, the aim of this paper is to clarify *what differentiates Nietzsche's and Foucault's relation to the truth and how this relation informs their respective theories of knowledge?*

In abstract, my proposition is that *Nietzsche and Foucault operate with an opposite understandings of the causal relationship between truth and knowledge, inducing substantial differences in their conclusions on the purpose of genealogy, but also the value of truth-seeking.* In effect, Nietzsche shows no reticence to break down truth into what is *held true as belief, truthfulness*, but equally *truth itself*. Even as he contends that beliefs may matter more than actual truths, he still maintains those important conceptual distinctions. Conversely, Foucault avoids this ground entirely, bundling these separate notions together. As such, he operates without an actual *theory of knowledge* informing what we can hold true as we seek to broaden our understanding of the world and ourselves. This helps him support his insights on power but importantly circumscribes its implications beyond historical study. Consequently, Nietzsche's comprehensive analysis offers a more potent answer to the question of the value of truth-

seeking for the philosophers following him. He does so by first articulating an overall coherent theory of knowledge, second by defining the circumstances under which truth-seeking is valuable.

II. *The Problem of Transcendental Truth in Nietzsche*

Establishing what truth is and how we may obtain – that is, its ontological and epistemological groundings – is a primordial question to answer before any discussion about what we are able to know can proceed. Therefore, before we begin our analysis, some clarifications on how truth is understood in this essay must be made.

Under a modest pragmatic guise, a statement can be considered true if it correctly reflects the actual state of affairs – that is, if it corresponds to the world as we experience it through our sense organs – or, as Nietzsche would have it, the transient world of *becoming*. Following Aristotle, this rudimentary notion of truth consists in saying “of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not” (M:B4, 1011b). Such a notion is necessarily bound by the conventions of language and holds that, even as agents use similar terminologies to designate objects, they might not share equal or perfect representations of them. However, it needs not signify that humans cannot come to minimally consensual and useful descriptions of the material world (Tarski, 1944, 360). For the statement: “snow is white,” English speakers understand that we are describing a particular instance of congealed water and its associated set of sensory experiences. Albeit an Alaskan may not perceive whiteness or the different stages of snow as a Texan would, using a similar linguistic frame of reference will still help them reach a relatively common understanding of its implications. Thus, this notion remains, in principle, free of metaphysical value as the arbitrariness and imperfection of our linguistic descriptions is assumed (Tarski, 1944, 362). As suggested by Roach (1999), I will argue that Nietzsche endorses this approach, which will be referred below as *rudimentary* truth.

However, the issue of representation becomes critical as agents start qualifying the content of abstract objects, such as Justice, or the Good and the Evil. Then, these concepts require a definite character, anchored on absolute metaphysical principles, to gain traction. This leads us to the Platonic notion of truth where concepts are apprehended as having a priori *forms*, discoverable through dispassionate reasoning. Applied to material phenomena, this produces a grammatical conflation between language and the *actual* “substance” of objects independent from our observations, to form an *abstract* “essence” belonging to a intemporal *true* world of

“being” (Allen, 1993, 9). As we assume the discoverability of these essences, truth-seeking is elevated as a virtuous aim and we receive the intellectual mandate to pursue *true* concepts to inform the *actual* world (Rorty, 1989, 26-27). This is the main problem identified by Nietzsche as it pertains to the pursuit of truth. He objects scientists’ attempts to bind our material reality – which can be understood in practical terms, but is *truly* unknowable beyond the confines of perception and language – to prescriptive judgments based on a set of universalizable standards. In doing so, scientists mistakenly assume their ability to fully describe *becoming* in terms of *being* and, thereby, relegate the former to secondary status. Following van Leeuwen (2005), this truth will be referred as *transcendental* truth. But as we shall see shortly, the dichotomy established in this section is challenged by Foucault, who argues that rudimentary truths hide a normative weight comparable to the transcendental one and suggests that truth is never consensual but imposed by ways of *discourse*.

III. *Overview: Nietzsche and Foucault on the Value of Truth-seeking*

Reviewing Foucault and Nietzsche, van Leeuwen (2005) and Roach (1999) arrive at two opposite conclusions on the value of truth-seeking. Van Leeuwen contends that Foucault provides the necessary extension of Nietzsche’s work on truth, whereas Roach retorts that Foucault’s rejection of rudimentary truths overlooks the practical and psychological limits to the deconstruction of all meanings highlighted by Nietzsche. However, both fall short of fully identifying the relationship Nietzsche establishes between truth and knowledge and miss two distinctions that are critical to capture the epistemological discrepancy between him and Foucault.

Roach (1999) holds that, while Nietzsche attacks 19th Century positivism by exposing our concepts as limited linguistic predicates of human interpretations, his intentions are not to disqualify all forms of truth-seeking. In light of the nihilistic consequences of having our transcendental illusions shattered, Nietzsche reckons Man’s responsibility to create his own artificial meanings to justify his existence on the chaotic stream of becoming. According to Roach (1999), while these “illusions” must respond to different human perspectives, they cannot be approached as “mere shadows on a wall - for [man] lives and suffers with these scenes” (Nietzsche, BT:1, 16). That is, even if perspectival truths are not ‘empirically’ accurate nor transcendently true, they maintain relevance against our practical purposes since humans cannot be free of the consequences of their interactions with becoming. As such, even if the

actual world cannot constitute the final arbiter for humans values, it still informs the varied perspectives Nietzsche wants to see flourish in artistic value creation. Thus, Nietzsche still reckons the necessity of “rudimentary truth-seeking” to constitute the knowledge horizon on which we build perspectival values and makes sense of ourselves. In this context, genealogy constitutes the means to revealing our original perspectives.

Conversely, van Leeuwen (2005) contends that whereas Nietzsche correctly outlines our problematic attachment to transcendental truth, he does not provide an clear answer about what ought to be done with the concept of truth itself once we have discovered that even our rudimentary truths rests on incomplete foundations. Meanwhile, by taking Nietzsche’s genealogy to its logical end, Foucault demonstrates that truth needs to be reconstrued as a discursive production of power but that we have so far been unwilling to detach it from the material reality to observe its hidden normative weight. As such, Foucault obviates the possibility that individual perspectives can become the platforms from which we create our own meanings since pre-existing networks of power impose discourses of truth that determine our perspectival expressions as subjects. Under Foucault’s analysis, we lose the illusion that subjects’ autonomy is possible within the scope of rudimentary truths. Consequently, van Leeuwen (2005) argues that the question of nihilism left by Nietzsche is clarified by Foucault’s genealogies, which reveal that it is our own obsession with stable meanings – rather than their discovered contingency – that drives individuals towards nihilism. Because we do not forgo our faith in transcendental truth, our minds negatively fixate on the appending relations of power sustaining it. Rather than a means to an end, genealogy becomes an end in itself, aimed at revealing the groundlessness of all truths.

However, as van Leeuwen (2005) eschews the theorization of truth in Nietzsche to reconcile him with Foucault, she adopts the line argument suggested by Nehamas (1985), which conflates Nietzsche’s perspectivism with truth relativism. This choice is unsurprising as several other scholars also reduce Nietzsche’s seemingly contradictory outbursts on truth to aesthetic purposes to accommodate the paradox of perspectivism. Accordingly, if we claim that all truths are purely perspectival, we are making at least one absolute truth-claim – which is, at first glance, self-contradictory (Gemes, 1992, 48). To solve this problem, Nehamas (1985) suggests that Nietzsche’s perspectivism should be approached modally – that is, Nietzsche allows perspectivism to be externally untrue, while maintaining its truth-value at a personal level (33). There, Nietzsche’s regular appeals to truth are understood as rhetorical and aimed at seducing the reader through authoritative rhetoric (Gemes, 1992, 60). However, by doing so,

van Leeuwen (2005) implicitly reduces Nietzsche's perspectivist hypothesis to truth relativism as his theory cannot gain traction without his perspective. Conversely, Roach (1999) correctly identifies that, even as we fail to attribute a consistent meaning to each utterance of "truth" in Nietzsche's work, we can discern a set of core epistemological premises that lay the foundation of Nietzsche's theory of knowledge. However, Roach's (1999) analysis still fails to properly characterize Nietzsche's interest in perspectival knowledge as he contends that subjective interpretations are only unequal in terms of their consequences. As such, he echoes Clark's arguments (1990) which holds that "[Perspectivism] requires us to grant that every belief that can be derived from a consistent set of beliefs is true, or at least as true as any other belief" (139). This naturalistic account is hardly sufficient. Indeed, Nietzsche does not only approach interpretations in consequential terms, but also *rank* them according to their "cognitive" import – that is, their ability to serve knowledge discovery (Schlacht, 1984, 77).

Reviewing Hales and Welshon's (1994) weak perspectivism, I will first clarify Nietzsche's notion of *anthropomorphic truths*, demonstrating how Nietzsche may produce an *absolute* claim to perspectivism and provide a ground for shared rudimentary truths without contradicting himself. Drawing on Schlacht (1984), I will then demonstrate that the qualitative difference between perspectival interpretations can be located in the characters of the *priest* and the *free spirit*. Having built a fuller picture of Nietzsche's theory of knowledge, I will discuss the differential functions genealogy serves in Nietzsche and Foucault to finally infer on the value of truth-seeking in both authors. In doing so, I will notably illustrate how Reginster (2007) pre-empts the idea that every will-to-truth necessarily translates as a will to subject others in Nietzsche.

IV. *Nietzsche's Truth: Logic and Anthropomorphisms*

Notwithstanding the argument advanced by Nehamas (1985) and Gemes (1992), the idea that Nietzsche's philosophy could be approached from a relativistic standpoint is hardly supportable and a host of scholars have attempted to solve the aforementioned paradox of perspectivism (see Clark, 1990, Reginster, 2001). In this section, I first introduce Nietzsche's epistemological argument against transcendental truth and explain how this latter provides him the space to theorize on our shared *anthropomorphisms*. Then, combining this analysis to Hales and Welshon's (1994) solution to the paradox of perspectivism, I present how Nietzsche may posit *absolute* truth-claims under certain requirements without abandoning the notion of

perspectival interpretations. On that basis, we are able to discern more clearly what kind of “ground” truths humans have access to according to Nietzsche, and how this notion informs his broader process of knowledge discovery.

Even as Nietzsche explicitly challenges the nature of our relationship to truth notably by claiming that “the genesis of language does not proceed *logically* in any case,” he only rejects the idea that our logical formulations can “refer to anything ontologically independent of perspectives” – and in this case, our *human perspective* (OTL:1, 145; Hales & Welshon, 1994, 104). Effectively, Nietzsche argues our linguistic concepts – or “metaphors” to designate objects – cannot simply gain meaning from the isolated observation of original entities, but only by establishing *relationships* of resemblance between those, based on the relatively similar stimuli they induce on our nervous systems:

“Every word instantly becomes a concept precisely insofar as it is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin; but rather, 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:1, 145, emphasis added)

Therefore, Nietzsche does not reject an objective material world from which we can gain practical knowledge through the use of logical reasoning and produce concepts that inform our understanding of reality. What is opposed is the ability of humans to grasp becoming in its descriptive completeness, as our collective definitions are premised on subjective assessments which arise out of inextricably imperfectible relationships of equality. Thus, there is no single “true” tree, or such a thing as the “Good,” but only a collection of *comparable* sensory experiences grouped under single terminologies. Our concepts can only be tautologically equal to themselves, for the different stimuli upon which they are formed are altogether unequal. Instead, Nietzsche wants us to depart from the idealistic view that wants those concepts to exist in totalizing unity reflective of a “true” world to realize that what characterizes the ‘factually correct’ rests on fundamentally incomplete human-made imagery.

But Nietzsche does not stop here. He digs deeper into the shaft of rudimentary truth by highlighting that logic *itself* is only an interpretation since even our most foundational means to understand reality – numbers, time and space – represent *all-too-human* forms of illusions, too:

“But everything marvellous about the laws of nature, everything that quite astonishes us therein and seems to demand explanation, everything that might lead us to distrust idealism: all this is completely and solely contained within the mathematical strictness and inviolability of our representations of time and space. *But we produce these representations in and from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins.*” (Nietzsche, OTL:1, 149-150, emphasis added)

However, as the last sentence indicates, these means of interpretation are innately embedded in humans’ physiological hardware. As such, “if each us had a different kind of sense perception [...] then no one would speak of such a regularity of nature, rather, nature would be grasped only as a creation which is subjective in the highest degree” (Nietzsche, OTL:1). This signifies that at the barest level, Nietzsche reckons that humans operate with a common appreciation of the laws of nature as captured by physics and biology. Accordingly, “*rational thought is an interpretation according to a scheme which we cannot discard*” since we have no choice but establishing relationships of causality and resemblances to analyse the physical world (Nietzsche, WP:522, 304).

This finding is essential to solve the paradox of perspectivism outlined earlier, which stated that the thesis of perspectivism could not be absolutely true if all beliefs were only a matter of perspective. With physics, Nietzsche kills two birds with one stone. First, he is able to argue that the empirical observations forming our rudimentary truths can never be used to justify transcendental truth-claims, since they are based on imperfect relationships of equality which fail to grasp the world of becoming in its descriptive completeness, even at a subatomic level. Second, he is able to produce an *absolute* claim to perspectivism by identifying logic as a shared anthropomorphism from which all subsequent perspectival interpretations flow. This is why Nietzsche celebrates physics, prompting that “we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense – while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on *ignorance* of physics or constructed so as to *contradict* it. Therefore: long live physics!” (GS:335, 266). With this, we begin to delineate what kind of truths humans may gain about their reality and why the rejection of transcendental truth in Nietzsche is not to be equated with a rejection of the scientific endeavour. Since logic is an embedded principle of human interpretations as a consequence of physics, we may produce logical claims that are absolutely valid in all *human* perspectives, yet nothing follows about *other* perspectives or a true world.

This philosophical position can be termed “*weak perspectivism*,” as it only requires that “there is at least one statement such that there is some perspective in which it is true, and some perspective in which it is untrue” (Hales & Welshon, 1994, 111-112). As such, weak perspectivism imposes minimal limits on the class of statements that can be held as perspectival and minimal requirements to those to be held as absolutely true, without making these two classes mutually exclusive. What remains uncertain is where our language depart from what could be considered shared anthropomorphisms. Coming back to our previous example, that “tree” fits different utterances of vegetal life does not necessarily make it an invalid category by human standards in so far as it accommodates our common descriptive purposes. However, it nullifies its absolute truth-value as its definite character cannot be transcendently determined. More critically, the truth-value of a moral concept such as the “Good” cannot gain traction beyond the scope of a particular perspective. Therefore, at its maximum level, *weak perspectivism* could justify that all consensually agreed material descriptions conform to this anthropomorphic criteria. Conversely, at its minimum level, anything logic demonstrates as unequal could be challenged – that is, our entire area of language. As evidenced in the following sections, Nietzsche is hardly interested in challenging our descriptions of material phenomena, but rather aims at casting doubt on our moral valuations of them. Therefore, I argue that the maximum version is congruent with his work. Nietzsche can thus still contend that normative interpretations are fully perspectival, while holding that rudimentary truths maintain their anthropomorphic truth-value as “effective knowledge” without contradicting himself.

V. *Nietzsche’s Untruths: Illusions and Useful Beliefs*

Having established that rudimentary truths may satisfy our anthropomorphic criteria – that is, our definitions of the material world may correctly inform the surface conditions of becoming to suit our shared practical ends – the question of normative interpretation remains. Contrary to Clark’s (1990) argument, *what is true* in a perspective cannot simply correspond to the set of beliefs one arbitrarily embraces (139). If it were such, this would imply that there should be virtually no difference between individuals’ beliefs and their anthropomorphic *truth-value*, nor their *internal* or *external* validity. This would not only reduce Nietzsche to moral relativism but also detach interpretations from their material contingency. Therefore, the question then becomes: where do we locate *individual* perspectives in this picture and how do these latter inform truth-seeking and our knowledge of phenomena at a personal and, perhaps,

meta-perspectival level? In this section, I begin by identifying Nietzsche's distinction between *what is true* and *what is held true as belief* in a perspective before elaborating on the necessity of beliefs and their validity *within* a perspective. Finally, I move onto evidencing Nietzsche's hierarchization of perspectival interpretations, thus outlining the existence of a criterion for *external* validity.

Although Nietzsche presents logic as an unescapable anthropomorphism, reason was not descended from on high with a natural inclination for the discovery of truth. Rather, the desire for truth only arose in an evolutionary fashion with the purpose to serve survival:

“What [humans] hate is basically not deception itself, but rather the unpleasant, hated consequences of certain sorts of deception. It is in a similarly restricted sense that man now wants nothing but truth: he desires the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth. He is indifferent toward pure knowledge which has no consequences; toward those truths which are possibly harmful and destructive he is even hostilely inclined” (Nietzsche, OTL:1)

Because the unknown may not cause us harm if we are never forced to confront its consequences, humans have little reason to inquire the truth beyond what their immediate needs command. As much as the incurable patient might be better off ignoring his future untimely death, are humans willing to ignore some of the harshest truths about their existence. This condition draws the natural boundaries of truth-seeking within a perspective to what serves it best. As such, what is true and what is held true as belief should *not* be conflated and Nietzsche insists on this distinction in the *Antichrist*: “Truth and the *belief* that something is true: two completely diverse worlds of interest, almost *antithetical* worlds” (AC:23, 144). Furthermore, this also clarifies that the truth-value of an interpretation is not simply determined by the *utility* that is derived from them *within* a perspective.

Conversely, we have a fundamental need to hold certain things as true since “we can only *comprehend* a world which we ourselves have made” and the absence of an instinct to truth *in absolute* is precisely what makes “untruth a condition of life” (Nietzsche, WP:495, 293; BGE:4, 35). This signifies that – past *shared* descriptive necessity – our interpretations are designed to suit our *particular* ends: “in every value judgment there is a definite point of view: the *preservation* of an individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, or a culture” (Nietzsche, WP:259, 162). Accordingly, the pursuit of knowledge itself cannot be fully

separated from an interested perspective organizing its belief system to advance its own flourishing.

This is why ordinary people and religious believers, being "herd creatures," have every reason to maintain their commitment to otherworldly beliefs. However falsely guided, Nietzsche admits that the herd's self-repressive beliefs continue to serve as a useful illusion that "*springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life* which tries by all means to sustain itself and to fight for its existence" (GMIII:13, 120). The beliefs of the herd are *internally valid* since these only erupt from a "physiological obstruction" to the herd's will-to-power (ibid). In practical terms, because the feeble physical and psychological constitution of the herd prevents it from freely discharging its instincts within its respective environment, the herd embraces the moral scheme offered by the *ascetic priest* as a vitiated means of self-empowerment. This goes to illustrate Nietzsche's idea that a complex personal constitution determines the locus of the will-to-power and, thereby, its exploitable set of internally valid interpretations within a given environment. That being said, "[w]hat a theologian feels to be true must be false: this provides almost a criterion of truth" (Nietzsche, AC:9, 132). Hence, even if the herd's beliefs are internally valid, they do not derive *truth-value* from that factor alone. Furthermore, Nietzsche argues that "[t]he ideas of the herd should rule in the herd but not reach out beyond it: the leaders of the herd require a fundamentally different valuation for their own actions, as do the independent, or the "beasts of prey" (WTP:287, 162). That is, if otherworldly beliefs gain validity *within* the perspective of the herd because of its own physiological limitations, their beliefs have no sort of validity for other "species" of men who do not face the same physiological constraints.

In fact, herd morality is also considered to be "man's greatest danger," by Nietzsche (GMIII:14, 122). Here, he runs into a problem: he has to show that certain subjective interpretations are not merely perspectival but that some may also be objectively inferior or superior to others. This indicates that Nietzsche envisages a vantage point from which the contingency of beliefs and their value can be uncovered; something he qualifies as his own accomplishment as a *free spirit*. In the following section, I outline how transcendently-informed interpretations prevent our quest for broader moral knowledge before unravelling the solution to perspectival partiality offered by Nietzsche. This step is critical as it evidences that, even if moral knowledge is contingent on human interpretations, these can only downstream from a certain reality which we can apprehend more thoroughly by exerting sufficient efforts.

VI. Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge: Truth-seeking and the Free spirit

Accordingly, Nietzsche views the unconditionality of beliefs that characterizes herd morality as an impeachment to Man's appreciation of *becoming* for two reasons. Firstly, convictions prevent from grasping reality in its perspectival variety as they demand "not to see many things, not to be impartial in anything, to be party through and through, to view all values from a strict and necessary perspective" (Nietzsche, AC:54, 185). As such, the "[t]he 'believer' does not belong to himself," rather he belongs to the tradition, which constrains his interpretations to an uncompromising perspective that is not his own (ibid, 184). Thus, his beliefs can only be a means to someone else rather than to himself. Secondly, convictions are necessarily produced in negation of the irreducible nature of *becoming*. They rely on a "proof by potency," that is the comforting feeling attained by denying the shifting nature of morality, even as they stands against the conspicuous absence of a true world to support them (Nietzsche, AC:50, 178). Since convictions spark from a fundamentally alien and self-protective perspective which demands pleasure before reasons, "[c]onvictions might be more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" (Nietzsche, AC:55, 185). In essence, convictions are *passive* falsifications of reality that pose as *absolute* truths to accommodate our existence. As such, they cannot add valuable knowledge to the table, but only promote the particular interests of the average man.

This is why Nietzsche declares that "the believer is not free to have a conscience at all over the question 'true' and 'false': to be *honest* on this point would mean his immediate destruction" (AC:54, 185, emphasis added). Here, we start locating Nietzsche's criterion of *external* validity: *truthfulness* – that is, a drive for philosophical probity coming to our own perspectival interpretations. To resolve the issue of perspectival partiality, we must get rid of any form of fanatical commitment to put ourselves in a position to compound varied interpretations. Then, we can enhance our moral knowledge by effectively forming *meta-perspectival* "truths" about multifaceted moral objects (Schlacht, 1984, 82). This conditions of truthfulness is embodied by the character of the *free spirit* as the apex apostate of perspective:

"In any event, however, what characterizes the free spirit is not that his opinions are the more correct but that he has liberated himself from tradition, whether the outcome has been successful or a failure. As a rule, though, he will nonetheless have truth on his

side, or at least the spirit of inquiry after truth: he demands reasons, the rest demand faith.” (Nietzsche, HAH:225, 108).

Thus, Nietzsche does not disvalue the research of a superior form interpretive “truth”. Rather, he opposes uncritical commitment to the existing sets of beliefs passed down by the tradition. Thus, if his project is fundamentally interpretive, it is not a normative one. Effectively, the free spirit does not seek absolute truths to impose onto others, but rather his liberation from constrained perspectives.

Furthermore, by stretching “the pathological conditionality of his perspective”, his shapeshifting abilities should allow him to uncover deeper, hidden knowledges in the process (Nietzsche, AC:54, 185):

“There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing , our “objectivity,” be. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we are capable of this what would that mean but to castrate the intellect?” (Nietzsche, GMIII:12, 119).

Importantly, while the free spirit never become will-less, he recognizes the diversity of his own changing instinctual drives once he has liberated himself from the assumption of an unwavering ethical soul. This is why Nietzsche also treats his own opinions as temporary: “only he who changes remains akin to me” (BGE, 223). Rather than denying the multiplicity of his own perspectives, the free spirit plays with them to discover new perspectival interpretations and enhance his knowledge of moral objects. In accordance with the transient nature of becoming, the perspectival knowledge gained by the free spirit is consciously endorsed as *provisional* and *incomplete*.

Here, scientific theories are just a type of interpretation among others, which Nietzsche still endorses: “[t]he last thing I want is to destroy the please these honest workers [scientists] take in their craft: for I approve of their work” (GMIII:23, 147). His contention with scientific interpretations is their current prevalence in the moral realm. In effect, Science circumscribes the research of moral knowledge to a unidimensional method that tries to reach beyond what falsification of resemblance may really achieve: “the philosopher demands of himself a judgement, a Yes or No, not in regard to the sciences but in regard to life and the value of life” (Nietzsche, BGE:205, 132). To Nietzsche, morality remains the privileged domain of

Philosophy, which covers the questions that Science may only help clarify but never meaningfully answer.

Thus, as Nietzsche calls for the legislation of values by the philosophers of the future, these must be produced in light of their *own* perspectival morality: “*Actual philosophers, however, are commanders and law-givers: they say, ‘thus it shall be!’ [...] Their ‘knowing’ is creating, their creation is a legislation, their will to truth is – will to power*” (BGE:211, 142). Contrary to the herd, the stronger physiological constitution of those self-legislators allows them to *consciously posit* moral “truths” since – as free spirits – they have rejected universalizable answers to moral questions. Their perspectival judgements are therefore self-directed, yet not intrinsically detached from their realities. Thus, their will-to-truth is also a mean of self-empowerment, providing internal validity to their interpretations. Yet, insofar as their moral “truths” do not *negate* becoming to reach an artificial descriptive completeness, their creations have an intrinsic non-obtrusive value attached to them, which is the predicate of their *external* validity.

So far, we have established that all humans operate under the same laws of nature, which induces a shared notion of logic necessary to make sense of the physical world by establishing relations of equality and causality. This condition was defined as a first *absolute* anthropomorphic truth from which we could infer relatively consensual descriptions of material phenomena (or rudimentary truths). Further, we have discussed that, past our common descriptive uses, normative interpretations were contingent on perspectival interests. This second condition was problematic only in so far as we stayed committed to a single perspective, which could only have a limited interpretive import. With the free spirit’s truthfulness, we finally observe a junction between the *external* and *internal* validity of interpretations: his rejection of transcendental truth, as well as his radical scepticism towards his own perspective, is the point from which we must start if we are to collect any form of substantive moral knowledge. By shifting perspective, we collect a variety of valuations to form meta-perspectival “truths” allowing “to control one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them” to construct *more objective*, even if temporary, interpretations of moral phenomena (Nietzsche, GMIII:12, 119).

As such, we have traced a more complete picture of Nietzsche’s theory of knowledge: Even if we can never fully grasp the truth in a transcendental sense, human knowledge can only be downstream to our physical reality. Hence, Nietzsche still understands both effective and

moral knowledge as an effect of truth – regardless of the limitation of a perspective, there is always something that remains from the order of the substance analysed. In this context, knowledge discovery informs our beliefs about what we can hold as true, but rarely about what is true in absolute. This insight into Nietzsche’s theory of knowledge finally enables us to appreciate the role of Nietzsche’s method to uncover the deeper roots of our modern values: genealogy.

VII. *Nietzschean Genealogy: From the Ground Up*

As Nietzsche resorts to genealogy, he aims to avoid the teleological logic that led his contemporaries to describe present interpretations as linearly related to the past. With genealogy, Nietzsche captures that “the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart” (GMII:12, 77). A critique essential to unfold the forgotten rearrangements of our value systems. Explaining the nature of genealogy, Nietzsche argues that

“purposes and utilities are only signs that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a thing [...] can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion” (GMII:12, 77).

Here, the reader will capture the “essence” of the genealogical endeavour. It aims at discovering the chain of events behind contingent interpretations, tracing back to their original and shameful forms – *if they exist*. What is more, Nietzsche suggests valuation conflicts between colliding wills, where the sequence of valuation unfolds according to subjects’ power to impose their own interpretations of objects onto others subjects. By virtue of such a process, we are entitled to doubt that even the most “modern” moral valuations reliably correspond to objective representations of reality since dominant interpretations would yet arise from intrinsically partial perspectives. Thus, one’s own valuations are at risk to be externally determined by stronger wills.

Tracing back these sign-chains, Nietzsche reconstitutes what he perceives to be the first subversion of perspectival values operated in the *slave revolt in morality*. In the first essay of

the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche exposes the two primo sources of moral valuation: “While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside’, what is ‘different’, what is ‘not itself’; and *this* No is its creative deed.” (Nietzsche, GMI:10, 36-37). He establishes that nobles’ valuations are immediately reflective of their successfully expressed perspectival instincts. “Right and wrong,” “truth and lie,” “good and bad,” all are emergent and self-directed valuations (Nietzsche, GMI:2&5, 26-29). This is opposed to the slaves, who mechanically respond to their obstructed volitions by negating nobles’ values, rather than by affirming of their own. In this way, the slaves shame nobles’ goodness into evilness, while recharacterizing themselves as the Good ones, thus forming the cradle of modern herd morality (Nietzsche, GMIII:14, 124). Still, both valuation modes remain *post hoc* rationalizations of their respective ability to express their physiological natures. Thus, even as their valuations are seen as unequal by Nietzschean standards, none of these appear less valid than the other at an internal level.

Yet, by the end of the first essay, Nietzsche states:

“Whoever begins at this point, like my readers, to reflect and pursue his train of thought will not soon come to the end of it – reason enough for me to come to an end, assuming it has long since been abundantly clear what my *aim* is, what the aim of that dangerous slogan is that is inscribed at the head of my last book *Beyond Good and Evil*. – At least this does *not* mean “Beyond Good and Bad” (GMI:10, 54-55).

Nietzsche makes it clear: as he goes “*Beyond Good and Evil*” to uncover the value of the herd’s transcendental beliefs, he nevertheless does not aim to question nobles’ valuation of the “Good and Bad.” But why is that? In effect, the problem Nietzsche identifies is specifically located in slave morality and the ascendance it has taken over other types of morality. It is not merely that slave morality is mono-perspectival, rather it is that its initial negation demands to subvert competing interpretations to realize its effect – that of empowering the weak by *castrating* the strong. Thus, Nietzsche is critical of the priestly mode of valuation only insofar as it forces the nobles to embrace a perspective which, in addition of not being theirs, is fundamentally detrimental to humans’ creative impulses.

As alluded earlier, Nietzsche recognizes that the logical conclusion to his genealogical inquiry would naturally lead him to challenge the foundation of noble morality and, eventually, our entire area of language. However, with the genealogical method, Nietzsche only attempts to re-transcribe the state that preceded the elevation of transcendental truth as a universal moral

standard. Beyond that particular point of origin, deconstructing valuations would gradually detach humans from any form of meanings to interpret their experiences, thereby reducing us to animals rid of moral conscience altogether. As such, his genealogy is specifically designed as a *means* to end: that of reclaiming our perspectival agency over moral valuations.

VIII. *Foucauldian Genealogy: Ceaselessly into the Abysses*

However, whereas Nietzsche attempts to relocate truths away from the metaphysical claims and back into the physical – even physiological – realm of our original perspectives, the power dynamics he suggests eventually lead Foucault to conclude that their assumed perspectival validity must dissipate, too. Indeed, Foucault reads in Nietzschean genealogy a critique of the crystallization of the notion of truth as the first fundamental “error” in our belief systems, creating the ability to “oppose itself to appearances” (NGH, 144). Accordingly, any truths-claim naturally detaches itself from becoming to artificially delineate its perimeter, thus gaining the normative power to determine what is knowable about its content and ourselves.

More specifically, this process of crystallization is described as two-fold: First, the *descent* provides the interpretive precedent commanding conditions of existence in the present by fixing the identities of objects. Respectively, the subject also arises through the imposition of a certain discourse of truth determining its artificial essence (Foucault, NGH, 147-148; SAP, 781). Second, the process of *emergence* establishes the nexus between present power and the production of knowledge that will be passed down in the form of discourses. As subjects appears within pre-established networks of power, they engage in the production of knowledge to further their externally determined subjectivities (Foucault, NGH, 149-150). Those two mechanisms are illustrated in the slave revolt, where nobles’ perspectival valuations become determined according to the reverted scheme of the priests. By shaming noble morality, the priests modify the content of the moral landscape to impose their vision of reality upon the nobles, which is then descended through the following generations. But contrary to Nietzsche, Foucault argues that the previous aristocratic status quo was already non-neutral. Nobles’ interpretations were effectively enforcing a certain normative order upon the slaves: by determining their essences as “bad,” the nobles justified the process of state creation to rule over the slaves (Foucault, SAP, 780-785; Nietzsche, GMII:17&18, 86-88).

With descent and emergence, Foucault establishes a circular chain-link between the production of knowledge, conveyed through discourses of truth, and eventually manifesting as

power to impose one's own valuations. This implies that the relationship between truth and knowledge has now been inverted: *truth has become an effect of knowledge*, while knowledge is itself an effect of power. In those circumstances, what matters is not merely subjects' capacity to physically coerce others, but to dominate the interpretive space by imposing new understandings of the real. Dominant interpretations are embedded in systems of rules and norms – such as language and legal codes – instantiating the necessary physical and psychological violence to enforce the order premised on them (Foucault, NGH, 150-152). This informs the Foucauldian notion of *discursive truth* which reduces all activities relating to truth-positing as involved in the maintenance of a certain regimentary order, including organizing devices such as rudimentary truths which are exposed as outgrowths of power itself. Accordingly, truth-claims cannot be realistically approached as the various echelons of an inverted pyramid of knowledge springing from an original point of interface with reality; and neither can language be salvaged from normativity. Hence, to Foucault, the pursuit of original perspectives can be summarized as one where “[t]he origin lies at a place of inevitable loss, the point where the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse, the site of a fleeting articulation that discourse has obscured and finally lost.” (NGH, 143). As much as descent never reveals the existence of an original point of departure, neither does emergence culminate into a single point of arrival where truer knowledges are revealed by reason.

Through genealogy, Foucault contends that we discover that *all* truth-claims rely on entangled layers of value-laden interpretations contingent on relations of power. On this basis, “[t]he purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation” (NGH, 162). Contrary to Nietzsche's advice to the free spirit, Foucault argues that we cannot escape those pre-existing networks of power to posit our own perspectival “truths” since subjectivities require the imposition of power to arise in the first place. As such, our perspectives are never truly ours. To liberate ourselves from oppression, Foucault suggests that we do away with the idea an essence attached to the individual. To that aim, the “meticulous” empiricism of his genealogy challenges the “errors” that defined the area of the known and allows us “to escape from a labyrinth where no truth had ever detained them” (Foucault, NGH, 146). As such, Foucault's genealogy is not conceived as a means to an end; it is an *end in itself*. It does not aim at finding an original point of departure to “build back better”, rather it exposes the notion of “truth” as a sham, while its continual dissolution is indirectly aimed at power itself.

IX. *The Value of Truth-seeking: Knowledge-Truth Relationships*

As we have just seen, Foucault's contention with the notion of truth is singularly different from that of Nietzsche. Foucault perceives truth as a conceptual "error that cannot be refuted," born out of 'intellectual' conflicts to legitimize and contest its very content with the weapons of reason (Foucault, NGH, 142). As such, he echoes Nietzsche's assessment of the priest's will-to-truth culminating in the sublimation of the ascetic ideal in modern science and, eventually, in its own refutation once we realize that we cannot grasp truth in a transcendental sense. However, whereas Nietzsche modestly relocates effective knowledge into rudimentary truths and moral knowledge into perspectival "truths," Foucault extends Nietzsche's critique to all form of truth-claims, including those appealing to rudimentary truths. This situation leads the two scholars to attribute a diametrically opposed value to the activity of truth-seeking.

Foucault's answer to the value of truth-seeking is implicit from the function he attributes to genealogy, that is dismantling the notion of truth as a problematic by-product of power. As mentioned in introduction, Foucault holds that "there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth" (NGH, 163). Therefore, Foucault discards the truth-seeking endeavour as it may only have oppression for motivation or, at minimum, for consequence. However, Foucault does not investigate the concept of truth directly and why we might want to uphold it, rather he looks at the role of truth-claims. In doing so, truth becomes construed as a purely discursive device, which eschews its practical aspects. This says little about the need for effective – or even moral – knowledge and how we can derive any once we rid ourselves of the notion of truth. Perhaps more contentiously, Foucault approaches the notion of truth in a very elliptical manner, which makes it difficult to distinguish clear boundaries to his epistemological claims. If, as Foucault, we are concerned with the question of identity, then – regardless of the psychological practicalities involved – his account of the relation between truth and power is relevant. However, extending it beyond the field of humanities becomes increasingly problematic, particularly as we apply his framework to the social study of 'hard' sciences. There, rather than complexifying our relationship to truth by integrating power in it, his epistemology simplifies it as some necessary distinctions disappear – such as the difference between what is believed to be true and what is objectively false.

While Foucault's decision allows him to produce an original account of truth, his reductionist approach lead him to overstate the plausibility of his theory of power. That power entails the production of a certain type of knowledge by determining objects of research or

accepted metrics, methodologies, and accredited authorities is hardly deniable. Conversely, the extent to which this prevents us from increasing our understanding of reality is highly contestable. In effect, modern science is founded on the principle that transcendental truth was an unrealistic standard for truth-seeking. Nowadays, we acknowledge that our most cherished “truths” can – and almost certainly will – be proven false once we have gained new information. Evidently, a philosopher like Thomas Kuhn would also recognize that a host of factors prevent new evidence from gaining traction within and outside academia, since the structures of power in place often have an interest in tempering them. But those dynamics alone appear insufficient to contain the emergence of *truer* knowledges overtime insofar as “power” cannot prevent the information about becoming from flowing down to us.

Conversely, to defend the truth-seeking endeavour, Nietzsche had to, first, reconcile his notion of knowledge and truth – that is how we can justify knowledge discovery without upholding the notion of transcendental truth – and, second, explain what qualitatively separates the priest’s will-to-truth from that of the free spirit. The first problem was addressed in the first two sections of my analysis: Nietzsche establishes two domains for truth: the material domain is covered by rudimentary truth, while the moral one is characterized as perspectival. Although the issue of interpretation remains constant, both are embedded within an anthropomorphic physical and physiological order, which fixates truth upstream to knowledge. Because all humans operate from this standpoint, interpretations are never fully separate from the substance analysed nor are they from the observers. This is why each contingent interpretation is legitimate from an isolated viewpoint, while truth is neither reducible to what is believed to be true in a perspective nor is it transcendently determinable.

The second problem was covered in my third sections and the discussion on genealogy, where we saw that Nietzsche hierarchizes the truth-seeking endeavour of the free spirit above that of the priest. Whereas the latter is predicated on convictions negating instincts and levelling individuals, the former is liberating and affirmingly creative. While no single interpretation is ever true in absolute, the free spirit distinguishes himself because he has no interest in imposing his own interpretations onto others or in seeking the comfort of settlement. His will-to-power commands him to confront his internal resistances to discover truer knowledges: “[h]ow much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*? More and more that became for me the real measure of value” (Nietzsche, EH:P:3, 218). While the priest’s *faith* subjects the slaves to transcendental truth; *truthfulness* drives the free spirit to overcome his own opinions to face

harsher truths. This distinction of *character* establishes the precondition determining the quality of interpretive imports in a context where self-interestedness remains systematic.

Paradoxically, truthfulness tends to disqualify everything we hold as true because we cannot demonstrate interpretations' truth-value beyond a certain point, which challenges the obligation to hold anything as true, a process encapsulated in the formula "the highest values devalue themselves" (Nietzsche, WTP:2, 9). In that respect, Nietzsche's analysis falls close to that of Foucault. However, Nietzsche stops ahead of that moment in his *Genealogy*. This decision is motivated on the principle that humans' share an *essential* need for perspectival meaning-making. This last point is what makes truth-seeking a self-endangering – and therefore worthy for itself – endeavour in Nietzsche's will-to-power doctrine (see Reginster, 2007).²

Taken together, these elements sets Nietzsche's perspectivist analysis apart from naturalism or relativism. It wants us to acknowledge simultaneously three seemingly contradictory notions: First, there are *some* discoverable objective truths about the nature of *human* existence (such as that we are bound by physics), but these never lead us to descriptive completeness of the real world. Second, these truths do not derive *absolute* value from their objectiveness, they only gain traction within the specific perspectives that needs them. Third, whether externally given or internally built, we all need "beliefs" to support our perspectival form existence, but the self-legislated ones remain intrinsically superior to others, for they have truth on their side. As such, the problem encountered by van Leeuwen, Clark, or Nehamas is that they conflate Nietzsche's perspectivism, which is attached to his theory of beliefs, and his assumed epistemological perspectivism, which is contradicted by the analysis produced in this essay. In Nietzsche, knowledge is downstream to a virtually infinite number of human realities, which thwarts universally binding moral truths. Nevertheless, collective sense *can* and *must* be made to apprehend the physical world in the form of rudimentary truths. Furthermore, by shifting perspective, one can grasp various perspectival truths and form a metabody of moral knowledge to appreciate human dynamics. As such, knowledge is *less likely* and – more often than not – *provisional*, but not impossible.

More dramatically, truth-seeking in Nietzsche is not summarized as the acquisition of power over others, but as a tool of self-empowerment that allows us to reclaim our moral

² See Reginster (2007) who details the will-to-power as working towards overcoming internal resistances, a process implying self-destruction, impermanence, and the inescapability of ultimate failure, which are all characteristics of the pursuit of truth in Nietzsche.

agency. Whereas Foucault opposed the “erecting of foundations” as the first step towards injustice, Nietzsche sought to reconceptualize power as channelled towards creative liberation – the kind that could only be brought about by a “redeeming man of great love and contempt” (GMII:24, 96). Foucault’s ‘confusion’ is therefore not surprising because Nietzsche believed that power was necessary to serve truth, but did not need to equate it. Nevertheless, this needs not mean that Foucault analysis has no import for Philosophy and Science at large. Foucault’s genealogies arguably enhanced our understanding of our social institutions and practices. Particularly, he was one of the last critique of the legitimacy of liberal democracy, illustrating how its rationale rested on profoundly dehumanizing principles (Bouveresse, 2016, 20). Therefore, it can be argued that while Nietzsche offers a more promising – but also more hopeful – theory of knowledge as we approach the hard problems of Science, in an era where its authority has gained hegemonic control over the public and private lives, Foucault remains more than ever relevant to challenge power in the unsuspected spaces that hides it.

“This is my way; where is yours? thus I answered those who asked me the way. For *the way*
– that does not exist”

(Nietzsche, Z:III:11, 195)

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