

Truth, Transcendence, and the Good

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Nietzsche regarded nihilism as an outgrowth of the natural sciences which, he worried, were bringing about “an essentially mechanistic [and hence meaningless] world.” *Nihilism* in this sense refers to the doctrine that there are no values, or that everything we might value is worthless. In the last issue of *Modern Horizons*, I offered this conditional explanation of the relation of science and nihilism: that a scientific worldview is nihilistic insofar as it rules out the existence of anything that cannot in principle be precisely picked out or identified.ⁱ What kinds of entities would a scientific worldview eliminate on the basis of such an assumption? The list is long and various, but it includes those intentional (mentalⁱⁱ) entities of our consciousness that underwrite the existence of persons, and more basically of thought itself – e.g., belief, value, agency, truth, and meaning. I argued in that previous paper that intentional concepts are ultimately inscrutable, and yet impossible coherently to deny. I claimed that we could no more doubt the existence of values than we could doubt reality itself – and when I spoke of values I had in mind the (suspicion-engendering) concept of the good, and was even toying with the related idea of the Logos (an even more suspect concept). There are a several attractive reasons why the idea of the good, or the Logos, might be regarded with suspicion, and why either might reasonably be discarded as a pseudo concept. Leaving the latter concern until later, we might worry that insisting on the possibility of an overarching good supports the idea of a total worldview, or that we are gradually progressing towards a single correct vision of things. A progressivist, totalising vision would seem to foreclose on outlooks, values, and persons that deviate from its most likely trajectory, and may stymie or interfere with incommensurate forms of otherness,ⁱⁱⁱ awkward disturbances, and idiosyncrasies threatening its more well-established precincts – perhaps whatever stands out as strange, rare, and indissolubly individual. The idea of an emerging universal standard of values thus might amount to a source of oppression, e.g., if it provides a warrant to transform a currently limited universally prescriptive set of global practices and institutes into an ever more elaborate totalising hierarchy. In the discussion below, I will say why the good, conceived as the Logos, suggests a more salutary trajectory for individuals, and erodes support for either a totalitarian vision or a dissolving nihilistic outlook on the world.

1 – Value relativism as a disguised nihilism

The doctrine of value relativism denies that any culture or worldview yields universal values and hence the doctrine seems to support an attitude of tolerance towards the beliefs and practices of an indefinitely large array of local cultures. With this tolerance comes the promise of an open society that accommodates no end of diverse ways of seeing and being in the world, however radically these approaches might diverge from one another. But this vision of an open society is not actually entailed by the thesis of value relativism, and would merely be an inadvertent result of open societies thus conceived, even if their most promiscuously tolerant members happened to regard themselves as relativists. For the thesis undermines the

possibility of values altogether, including the ambitious prescription that we should accommodate all values.

Value relativism implies that value statements are true relative to the worldview (conceptual scheme; language) of a particular culture or individual. This is not a controversial position, at least not among those who hold the holistic view that value statements, like all statements, derive their meaning from a wider network of meanings, from a worldview or language. The policy of relating the truths of value statements to worldviews only becomes controversial in instances that seem to sever the link between worldview and world, e.g., when we allow that the same sentence can simultaneously express contradictory statements. For then the concept of truth, as it applies to value statements, would cease to have a (cognitively) intelligible meaning, which is to say there would be no value statements. This implication leaves us with the doctrine of nihilism, the view that there are no values, the positivist version of which is that all sentences aiming to express value statements are cognitively meaningless. Donald Davidson, incidentally, once offered an alternative interpretation of the problem of assigning different truth values to the same sentence, while considering the related problem of indeterminacy of meaning.^{iv} Linguistic indeterminacy seems to allow that the same sentence could be simultaneously true and false. But as Davidson said, we are not left with that (truth-dissolving) consequence if we look beyond the grammatical appearance of the sentence and see that the sentence's meaning varies between worldviews, which is to accept that the sentence belongs to distinct languages and is not after all the same sentence.^v So, the indeterminacy of meaning thesis turns out not to be nearly as dramatic as many theorists imagine if we adopt this straightforward policy, which is readily available from the standpoint of linguistic holism.

We might be tempted to use this strategy to save relativism. But I assume that neither cognitive relativism nor value relativism is intended merely to express the platitude that (semantically) different sentences can express different truths. Cognitive relativism, i.e. relativism about truth per se, abandons the very idea of objective truth, and hence is self-defeating for fairly obvious (and often rehearsed) reasons. *Value* relativism is less clearly susceptible to this charge; it dismisses the idea of the good, the notion that the truth of value statements transcends the specific worldviews in which they are expressed. For value relativism to evoke a modicum of drama, it needs to dangle before us the possibility that value statements are (1) both true and false, or (2) only true locally. The first option, which forsakes the straightforward strategy Davidson offers, dissolves truth, leaving nihilism, while the second option amounts to the incommensurability thesis, which, as applied to values, implies that some or all value statements can only be expressed or understood within their language of origin, and are untranslatable or incomprehensible beyond it. With incommensurability, the spectre of a value-eliminating nihilism vanishes, or seems to, and a potential infinitude of local values are kept safe from contact or collision with alien values. Interpreted through the incommensurability thesis, value relativism can thus be used to help protect the cognitive stature of local value hierarchies, or the tranquility of those who would prefer not to disturb

the values that they or others live by. But incommensurability implies a highly dubious view of cultures, worldviews, and languages, picturing as it does these systems of meaning or thought as atemporal schemes that arrest the minds or the hermeneutic initiative of the persons whose views they order.^{vi} A person perceiving the world through their linguistic thought scheme by this thesis would be incapable of revising her beliefs or values, or widening her view of the world beyond the concepts that her language or worldview *already* contains. She is either frozen by her scheme, or frozen out of it, leaving her for all intents and purposes thoughtless and mute. The scheme itself must be a kind of Parmenidean enclosure, in some ways offering access to the world, or a world, but also unaccountably impermeable to the influence of the world, whether this influence is attempted by thinkers bringing new, adaptive interpretations of the terms of in-scheme sentences, or translators offering terms and sentences from foreign schemes.

To conceive languages and the world this way is to take the position that languages divide the world into impenetrable, untranslatable compartments, and create as many worlds as there are radical variations among languages. How such discrete languages and their worlds would appear in the first place if languages are so inhospitable to change is a mystery; the docility or lack of initiative of participants in such languages when facing the inadequacies of their scheme's conventions, at the level of concepts or propositions, raises a lesser (psychological) mystery. These kinds of problems suggest an untenable construal of the holistic linguistic doctrine that statements are true or false relative to a language – which overlooks the fluidity of actual languages. This (untenable) construal suggests an odd irony, as one of the common motives for adopting a holistic view of linguistic communication is to lift meaning from single (isolated) sentences into a wider linguistic sphere, which permits language users more fluently to adapt the meaning of the sentence to the variety of contexts that face language users. This is not the place to argue at length for a (decidedly) more Heraclitean view of our linguistic-conceptual capacity and the linguistic conventions that *shape our outlook* (as Whorf and others rightly note) and that *we in turn shape and ceaselessly adapt*.^{vii} But since our reason for addressing this issue is to bring relativism into our sights, I would be remiss not to mention that another common motive for conceiving the language-world intersection from a holistic standpoint is to release ourselves from the intractable problems associated with the subject-object distinction. The relativist's view of language and the world introduces a peculiar version of this problem. Even though the doctrine of relativism normally is thought to abandon the subject-object distinction in favour of the most sweeping subjectivism, it reinstates the distinction when it relegates truth, some truths, permanently to a closed language or worldview. For the incommensurability of the resulting closed, subjective worldview creates an impassible gulf between itself and other worldviews, such that each worldview presents an inaccessible object to the other. Further, it creates a secondary gulf between the worlds that these relative worldviews describe, and all the worlds postulated or created by other (incommensurable) worldviews.

If we conceive reality as corresponding to the ever-changing semantic conceptual commitments needed to maintain a plausible worldview (i.e., accept a version of holism), it would nevertheless be a mistake to eliminate *either* subject or object (i.e., become subjectivists or objectivists) – even if we abandon the distinction that ontologically *separates* the two concepts! That thought underlies the (Hegelian) view that subject and object, or worldviews conceived alternatively as both, exist in a perpetual tension within an unfolding history which is never comprehensively unified nor ultimately plural. Relativists who fasten on to an interpretation of holism that has language determining reality, or conjuring into existence new discrete worlds, similarly abandon the distinction. But in relegating truth to the local level, they are not in a position (imagine as they might otherwise) to keep a wider tension with objective reality alive. Beyond local truth regimes, the subject-object distinction fades into a plurality of discrete subjective realities, or truth regimes, each immune to the kind of stimuli or sources of contrary inspiration that might sponsor revision and renewal, leaving relations between regimes to be determined by assertions of power, acts of submission, or mutual indifference.

2 – Mixed cultures and the good

Moral relativism sometimes is characterized as representing a “moral universe” that is “constantly fluid and ungrounded.”^{viii} But we should distinguish between how the doctrine of moral relativism informs the meta-outlook of its adherents or critics and the stability or fluidity of the local moral cultures whose core values, the doctrine encourages us to believe, cannot be invalidated or improved by the implicit insights of contrary values originating from another “moral universe.”^{ix} Adherents of the doctrine, taking a general view of the variety of moral visions that individuals or cultures have adopted, assume a sophisticated view of the wider moral universe, from which it appears that values could never, in theory or legitimately in practice, coalesce around a particular moral sensibility or set of principles. From the meta-stance of their theory, a moral relativist would presumably view this universe as a chaotic place in which values are entirely fluid and forever groundless, unless she is able to manage the schizophrenia of simultaneous immersion into all the local moral schemes of her imagination, or her comparative anthropological understanding of the morality of all the cultures she has examined. Yet if she could descend from the meta-view of theory into the relativised worldview of an imagined or actual culture, her “moral universe” would be comparatively stable if her theory is true, if local worldviews really are isolated from semantic change occurring as a result of interaction or collision with other worldviews; and perhaps she would, owing to the stability of an isolated culture, *feel* that the moral vision of her worldview is well grounded.

Moral relativism is of course not a feature of isolated cultures whose values are homogenous. Nietzsche suggests this observation in section 260 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, when he first offered, and then qualified, his famous theory of the origins of master and slave morality.

Wandering through the many subtler and coarser moralities which have so far been prevalent on earth, or still are prevalent, I found that certain features recurred regularly

together and were closely associated – until I finally discovered two basic types . . . There are *master morality* and *slave morality* – I add immediately that in all the higher and more mixed cultures there also appear attempts at mediation between these two moralities, and yet more often the interpenetration and mutual misunderstanding of both, and at times they occur directly alongside each other – even in the same human being, in the same soul.^x

Moral relativism is likely to occur in “higher and more mixed cultures” with the appearance of competing moralities; it would seem to stem from the suspicion that “mediation between” these moralities might not have a rational basis, and crystallises in the sceptical proposition that such a basis is in principle unavailable.

Nietzsche’s division of moralities into a variety of master and slave perspectives skirts this sceptical conclusion, as does his emphasis that misunderstanding between these perspectives, even when they interpenetrate, is more prevalent than attempts at clarity or resolution. His theory and observation might account for the heterogeneous, seemingly incommensurate moralities of our “mixed culture,” but it does not imply the thesis of moral relativism, at least not in the passage I quote above. Moral relativism also requires the two doctrines which in the previous section I argued should be abandoned: the slightly fantastic doctrine that the worldviews from which our moral beliefs take their sense are impermeable, and trap their members in static mental/semantic prisons; and the view that truth is inexpressible beyond these worldviews, and thus is in some sense disconnected from reality.

We might, to avoid such views, adopt a nihilistic approach that eliminates moralities, and reduces our experience of the intentional/mental phenomena ostensibly underlying morality entirely to the impulses of our nervous systems as they respond to the internal and environmental stimuli that activate them. Many current defenders of physicalism assume versions of this picture of the world, as part of a more specific empiricist commitment to the view that science ultimately entails the elimination of all intentional entities and relations – e.g., belief, meaning, desire, hope, despair, value, agency, and personhood. Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power represents a less reductive version of this approach to our moral experience, insofar as it preserves, in the idea of an *individual* who *wills*, the intentional phenomena of desire, self, and agency – even though his doctrine is meant to explain the *basic* impulse behind all forms of life, however simple.

Nietzsche was profoundly aware of the nihilistic implications of a reductive empiricism whose status had been elevated beyond the heavens (displacing them) by the tremendous successes of the natural sciences. Indeed in *The Gay Science*, he declared that the cultural threat of nihilism arose from the “essentially mechanistic [and hence meaningless] world” envisioned by a purely scientific worldview. As I argue in “The Nihilistic Image of Reality,” however, the will to power, while it presupposes many of the intentional concepts needed to stave off nihilism, provides no more of a rational basis for distinguishing between the potential infinitude of competing expressions of power or desire that would establish a hierarchy of values than

Bentham's principle that we should maximise pleasure, which Nietzsche was tempted by before deciding on his own principle. Both principles were intended to offer a naturalistic account of ethics in a world in which the possibility of a metaphysical basis of the good had, allegedly, collapsed before a scientific understanding of reality; and each presents an insufficient doctrine which, ironically, rests on the same metaphysical assumption – i.e., whatever X (e.g., power, pleasure, or survival) humans ultimately desire amounts to the good; more starkly, desire is equivalent to value, or we ought to value what we value. Clearly desire per se, or a proxy for desire based on variants of this metaphysically empty assumption, is not *equivalent* to a rational basis for aesthetics or morality, for valuing what we regard as valuable. But is a rational basis for the concept of value, for the good, conceivable? Perhaps individuals should give up on the idea of the good and simply assert, or acquiesce before, whatever hierarchies of power they desire to instantiate, wish to promote, preserve, or submit to – or simply put aside choice and drift on the sea of their inner impulses and external stimuli.

The question that prompts such abject possibilities is misguided. The problem of the good is insoluble if we think of it as a clearly specifiable, distinct basis or standard. The good is not a standard that can be raised and justified, or sceptically criticised, rejected, deconstructed, etc., from the standpoint of naturalistic observations about the overriding desires of hominids and other species, or on the basis of the competing claims of our mixed cultures, or as a result of any basis of analysis. It is not a fixed standard, susceptible of support or scepticism, because it cannot be detached from the complex array of interrelated, indeterminate/temporal intentional concepts that underwrite our existence as meaning-based, signifying moral beings. When we invoke the good (generally implicitly as a matter of course), we are, to whatever extent our finite understanding and degree of agency allows, relying on a host of entities and relations presupposed by the concept of value, and from which this concept cannot be disentangled. An approximate, incomplete list might include, alongside value, as I suggest above, belief, meaning/language, truth, agency, and the self, that mysterious locus of consciousness and action through which this constellation of presupposed concepts becomes flesh (and from whose flesh, neural activity, etc. it emerges). And since selves are as rooted in culture as they are in biology, these concepts – through the persons, and their deeds and creations, in whom they are embodied and expressed – are also the outcome of *traditions*; or, in the case of “higher or mixed-cultures,” as Nietzsche might say, of many interpenetrating traditions.

To embrace nihilism as a coherent doctrine, we would need to eliminate the whole array of concepts that inform, conceptually and existentially, our historical and moment-by-moment being in the world. In the last edition of *Modern Horizons*, I developed an argument for the ontological priority, and indispensability, of this array of interrelated intentional concepts. The aim of that argument was to reject nihilism, which, I concluded, entailed a prohibitively high cognitive cost. I won't repeat that argument here. Instead, *to signal a decisive departure from modern and post-modern philosophy*, I will adapt the ancient concept of the Logos, to support an argument for the view that the good is a basic feature of reality.

3 – Intentionality, truth, and transcendence

It may seem odd to invoke the Logos, a conceptual relic abandoned alike by modern and post-modern thought, to support the already singular claim that the good is ontologically basic. The Logos cannot be defined more precisely than the good; and two millennia ago it acquired, in the Gospel of John, theological associations which further complicate its rhetorical value. I plan to side-step the most singular of these associations, though not all that neatly, as I accept the basic idea behind Christianity's unique contribution to the history of the concept – that notwithstanding its infinite nature, the Logos becomes flesh in the words and deeds of persons.

At the inception of its written history, Heraclitus declared that the Logos “is common to all”^{xi} and that all humans are “intimately connected”^{xii} with it. He also said that “men keep setting themselves against it.”^{xiii} Depending how we interpret these (somewhat murky) pronouncements, perhaps the Christian conception is not unique after all, or only unique in that it overtly presents the Logos as inseparable from flesh, an actual, corporeal person. The Logos thus conceived, as embodied in a person, is irreducibly a field of intentional activity and simultaneously thoroughly immersed in whatever other fields of (neural, quantum, etc.) activity-processes that comprise the being of a person. The Logos then represents (this is how I propose to discuss it, to begin with) the intentional states – beliefs, desires, values, meaning, truth, agency, and so on – of a person conducting her life, in effect the embodied and active worldview of a person. By contrast, when we describe these intentional concepts of the Logos (including truth and the good, the two concepts that classically define the Logos) in isolation, and separately from an actual person, we are referring merely to an abstraction, to a set of disembodied concepts that do not refer to any actual state of being.

Heraclitus' declaration that “men keep setting themselves against” the Logos is consonant with the Christian conception of the Logos, and I assume any plausible conception of the good. “Any” suggests an indefinitely wide range; so let me make a fairly sweeping claim, to narrow the range of options. The good cannot plausibly be conceived as a standard that promotes individual or general happiness, utility, civic security, peace, social harmony, or whatever else human beings, by custom or nature, desire, but instead represents a continuous challenge to the sufficiency of all human standards or hierarchies. This might seem to be an (especially) odd claim to offer, after insisting that the concepts of the Logos reside only in actual persons. I intend the claim to point to our individual and collective finitude, but more importantly to the indispensable idea of *transcendence*, without which the concept of value reduces to particular objects of desire, configurations of preferences, or desire for the sake of desire. It is not difficult to describe the values of any person in such terms, which is an indication of the stability of our (moral and aesthetic) finitude. But human beings are not *reducible* to a particular state of their finite being, so long as they are more or less still alive. The idea of transcendence implies a tension between our finite human identity, in its current configuration of habits, preferences, aspirations, and the like, and the inexhaustible nature of reality, which always

sustains above us the uncomfortable spectre of a need to reevaluate, expand, or refine, whatever values in the moment, brief or long, absorb our attention.

I would call this need an *ontological need*;^{xiv} for the individual who suffers from it has succumbed to a basic creative-rational need to engage (satisfy a curiosity about, attempt to understand, open himself to, esteem, become inspired by, etc.) a wider reality, and above all to satisfy a creative-rational need to discover or create (aesthetic or moral) values beyond the state of his current values or valuations. This ontological human need supports an ongoing impetus, or sustaining motivation, to undertake the process of *self-overcoming*, a concept at the heart of Nietzsche's (dazzlingly unsystematic) corpus of thought. My view of individual transcendence resembles but in the end differs from Nietzsche's understanding of the process as ultimately grounded in the will to power. I have no wish to reject Nietzsche's *psychological* explanation, or to aim for an account of the psychological motives that underlie the process of self-overcoming, which I suspect will vary in many respects from person to person (a point which Nietzsche's theory accommodates). So, instead of speculating about the interests, sources of inspiration, inducements to curiosity, accidents of personal history, and so forth, that might contribute to the process whereby an individual, intentionally or unintentionally, changes, I will ask a potentially dangerous question (because it puts the crucial concept of transcendence in jeopardy). *Why should* one seek to change oneself?

Posing this question is not to ask why anyone *wishes* to change, a psychological question. An individual might wish radically to alter her current views, sensibility, etc., or to place herself in conditions in which the likelihood of such an outcome is increased. But beyond this statistically remarkable desire, what *reason* could she possibly have to desire such an outcome (a change in herself), or to desire anything? With this second question, we return to the opposition between the doctrine of nihilism and the idea of the good which we have been circling. A succinct, admittedly cryptic, answer which I shall raise against the nihilistic assertion that there are no values (i.e. no rational reasons to desire or affirm anything) can be stated in the following axiom: Truth is a value.^{xv} I shall not defend this enigmatic axiom at length. But, we should note, if it is true, then the doctrine of nihilism, which asserts that there are no values, is false. Further, the axiom sheds light on the existential question of why anyone should change, which, in turn, illuminates (over time) the claim that truth is a value.

If a person recognises that an important belief she holds is probably false and that a contrary belief is probably true, she has a *rational* reason to relinquish her belief, or to worry about why she is keeping it, and possibly to adopt the contrary belief. If she thoughtlessly, willfully, obediently, acquiescently, etc. persists in holding on to her false belief, or refusing to investigate her reasons for holding it, she would seem to be behaving irrationally, by any plausible understanding of reason – to some extent or other, perhaps owing to a confusion about the meaning of belief or truth or reason, or to a failure to recognise the relation of reason to conduct, or because she has contracted one or a few or many of the intellectual or ideological illnesses that infest our mixed culture. Conversely, she would seem to be acting

rationally when she recognises and adopts new beliefs in this situation. Every time a person changes an important or core belief, she thereby changes an aspect of her worldview, and thus in some measure changes herself (whether this change *establishes* itself in her character or her soul is of course a separate issue), or *is* changed, if we wish to downplay (not eliminate) her agency. If she changes her core belief *because* she recognises that it is untrue, or comes to see that a contrary belief is true, we can affirm that she had a disinterested reason to change, based on a fundamentally rational desire – and have thus answered the question why she was right to change.

Ideally truth in this sense (as a basis for rational action or choice) functions as a catalyst for the ongoing revaluation and recovery of values needed to sustain a living culture, or a flourishing individual existence. The will to power, sheer desire infusing myriad motives apart from truth, might provide a psychological, sociological, economic, and so on, explanation for why we change, whereas *the intrinsic value of truth, for a rational being, lets us understand why such a being has, under certain alethic and existential conditions, a moral-ontological obligation to change*. But what values might *truth conceived as a standard* encourage a culture or an individual to adopt? This question misleads us in a way similar to the question posed near the end of the previous section about a single rational basis of the good. No single standard, including the axiomatic truth that truth is a value, can tell us how to populate or develop a hierarchy of values. But keeping before us the proposition that truth and value are essentially entangled lets us recover “the good of intellect,” and to recognise that the problem of nihilism, or, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, “the problem of the *value of existence*,”^{xvi} is soluble.

4 – The Logos as creative rationality

Hegel’s landmark work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* addresses the related issues of transcendence and intentionality from the retrospective vantage point of finished world history (Minerva taking her flight over an already lifeless terrain). The approach he takes to these issues has been widely criticised as remote and abstractly schematic, a criticism which is undeniable, at least as a summary characterisation. But notwithstanding this criticism, Hegel’s encapsulating vision of his version of the Logos, stated in a verse from Schiller at the end of his great work, is luminous in the understanding it imparts: *Geist* (the Logos) *only* “foams forth” in its infinitude “from the chalice of this realm of spirits.”^{xvii} Unless it actually manifests itself in this world, the Logos, on Hegel’s account, is “lifeless and alone”^{xviii} – a dead abstraction, nothing.

The concreteness of Hegel’s vision of the Logos is salutary. Abstract, otherworldly thinking vitiates our experience of the Logos, reducing it to picturesque forms of kitsch (e.g., evocative notions of a paradisiacal afterlife), and depriving our souls of a plausible conception of the good among our intentional (humanist-spiritual) traditions. Do we still believe in otherworldly abstractions? Many people still do. But the abstracting, reductive procedures of methodological empiricism represent a far more compelling and widely-accepted threat to the traditional sources of human significance. Nevertheless, perhaps we should be reluctant to

view science *per se* in such a dismal light, unless we are in a position to affirm the *unscientific* (merely scientific) dogma that ontology ultimately reduces to a scientific understanding of the world, or to imagine that we can know in advance what aspects of reality will, or will not, successfully be addressed by scientific inquiries far into the future.

A worldview based exclusively on methodological empiricism, in any case, poses a *cultural*, not an epistemic, threat (it fails to rise to the level of an epistemic problem). For it would be incoherent to accept a view that precludes, i.e., *eliminates as illusory*, the basic concepts of thought itself, which is the positivistic endpoint of methodological empiricism if it is made to sponsor a worldview. Are we introducing a false dilemma when we raise the problem of either eliminating the (alleged) entities of thought as illusory, or accepting them as real? Why not pragmatically retain these entities as useful bits of theory? Perhaps only doctrinaire eliminativists would be tempted to grasp explicitly the first horn of this dilemma. Yet the pragmatic contention that the basic features and processes of thought are purely theoretical entities, abstractions which disappear at a certain level of analysis as we construct more empirically-sound models of reality, implies an eliminativist program, albeit one mediated by a continuous sleight-of-hand operation which hides from sight the elimination of all aspects of intentional reality while pretending to keep them on display.^{xix}

As incoherent as a more straightforward eliminativism is, at least its proponents continue to evince a strong will to truth. In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers a polemic against the “will to truth, to ‘truth at any price,’” which anticipates the later eliminativists. The “will to truth,” he tells us, shows a lack of “respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties.” The polemic reaches its apotheosis in section 373, in an influential^{xx} critique of positivism with which Nietzsche attacks “the faith [of natural scientists] in a world that is supposed to have its equivalent and its measure in human thought and human valuations – a ‘world of truth’”:

Do we really want to permit existence to be degraded like this – reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator and an indoor diversion for mathematicians? Above all, one should not wish to divest existence of its *rich ambiguity* . . . That the only justifiable interpretation of the world should be one in which . . . one can continue to do work and do research scientifically in your *sense* (you really mean, mechanistically?) – an interpretation that permits counting, calculating, weighing, seeing, touching, and nothing more – that is a crudity and naiveté . . . Would it not be probable that, conversely, precisely the most superficial and external aspect of existence . . . would be grasped first – and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped?

The apotheosis occurs a few sentences later, when Nietzsche indicts the view that mechanics represents “the first and last laws on which all existence must be based” with his charge that “an essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially *meaningless* world.”

Nietzsche's critique of the "will to truth, to 'truth at any price,'" of "a world of truth," cedes too much ground to a "mechanistic" outlook. Rather than bringing *truth* into question, he might have, on the heels of his critique of positivism, simply abandoned the undefended assumption that the propositions and formulas of science ultimately circumscribe the "world of truth."

In section 344 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers the hypothesis that the "will to truth . . . is hostile to life and destructive – that it might be a concealed will to death."^{xxi} That hypothesis extends his critique of a mechanistic worldview, but it is also meant to raise a problem for his own resilient faith in truth and in science.

[I]t is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests . . . [W]e 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 the truth, that truth is divine. – But what if this should become more and more incredible, if nothing should prove to be divine any more . . . ?^{xxii}

If we come to regard our faith "that truth is divine" as implausible or nonsensical, Nietzsche fears, we will eventually face the nihilistic prospect of "an essentially mechanistic world" in which "existence . . . [is] reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator."

Can we attach any sense to this faith? I shall call whatever we properly revere, or justifiably accept as an absolute value, divine. In this limited sense, truth, conceived as the Logos, counts as divine, since, as I claim above, it is an absolute value for any rational being qua rational being. In contradistinction to deflationary models, the Logos represents truth as essentially related to the good, and, in our recovery of this ancient idea, to the meaning-making, motivating processes of a person's intentional existence. The Logos, under this interpretation, is inseparable from an individual's creative agency (the terrible burden of her freedom) and the changing conceptual, linguistic, artistic, etc. traditions underlying her worldview. But worldviews are unendingly diverse. So, which expressions of the Logos, which creative acts and traditions, should we revere, despise, challenge, revise, ponder, ignore – allow to occupy our attention? Can the essential feature of truth adhere to the Logos if it is grounded in an *endless* variety of worldviews? Our most straightforward and unimpeachable understanding of truth, correspondence to reality, deepens the quandary. If truth corresponds to reality, it would seem that we need to confirm or reject the beliefs, or values if these exist, that we take to be true, using the methods or strategies that yield a reliable, transparent, consistent, and precise view of the world. Otherwise, we can never be sure which of our beliefs is true, and which commitments, if any, beyond a general commitment to truth itself, support a worthwhile or flourishing human existence. But, as I have been intent to show, here and elsewhere, the intentional aspects of the world which underlie our humanity elude *clear and exact formulation*. If that is right, the problem of the value of existence would seem to be insoluble, for those of us who subscribe to one of our most basic analytic canons – the idea that propositions must be well-formed and more or less precisely stated. Before we are tempted to despair of a resolution to this basic problem of our existence, we might first question the

analytic assumption that truth only appears to us in the guise of precisely-stated or well-formed propositions, theories, definitions, models, etc., clothed in clear and distinct concepts.

In his introductory remarks to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle addresses this assumption when he observes that “it is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind [of inquiry] which the nature of the particular subject admits.”^{xxiii} In ethics and political science, for instance, precision of premises is more or less unavailable. Nevertheless, productive inquiry is possible, as Aristotle’s own discussion of ethics amply shows, for a person trained in the subject who has “experience of life and conduct.” Intelligently-acquired experience of these, according to Aristotle, supplies “the premises and subject matter of this branch of philosophy.”^{xxiv} Aristotle’s methodological heuristic may concern more the *justification* of premises than their very formulation. Either way, individual experience *per se*, we might add, counts for little; the theories of an individual whose life experience has been largely isolated from a tradition of thought almost certainly will be relatively paltry and shallow, a limitation extended by the fact that not all traditions are equally far reaching, well sustained, rich, subtle, rigorously developed, and so on.^{xxv} I suggested above that the unending diversity of worldviews purportedly representing intentional reality threatens to undo the idea of intentional truth. But diversity of worldviews, concurrently and over time, is the lifeblood of a tradition (a living tradition), and hence an indispensable condition of productive inquiry. Along with other alethic conditions, a diversity of *contending* views provides, as Hegel’s *dialectical* portrayal of history luminously shows, the living foundation for current and inter-generational testing and transfiguration of the variety of worldviews underlying the religious, aesthetic, ethical, scientific, and other practices, institutions, expressions, or explicit theories that purport to capture our intentional-objective reality. Yet, even under Minerva’s retrospective flights over this contested terrain, analytical clarity is scarcely available at this (porous) intersection of our subjective and objective worlds; for the basic concepts of the Logos refer to a reality which is cognitively inexhaustible.

The multitude of worldviews which purportedly correspond to moments of this inexhaustible reality may tempt us in the direction of the (unintelligible) view that all values are equally authoritative, or to accept the practical corollary that everything is permissible. Neither attitude is supportable (even if they were otherwise intelligible) if we accept that the basic aspects of the Logos, including truth, are essentially interrelated, and that it is rational to revere truth. If, in turn, it is rational to revere the Logos, as it must be if [it is rational to revere truth](#), it would be fundamentally wrong to eliminate, conceptually or practically, the value of any of its *essential* aspects. We thus may have recourse to an array of (interrelated) implicit standards (the basic concepts that comprise the Logos) that forestall the nihilistic vision of an empty infinitude in which everything (and therefore nothing) is permitted. These standards allow us – so far as our resourcefulness, critical insight, imaginative acuity, charity, and so forth, extends – to welcome, or reject, *on a rational basis*, values exhibited, expressed, or asserted on the basis of the hierarchies of others, and to question and reevaluate, or defend and create, the values of our own hierarchies.

The Logos thus conceived retains our common-sense view that the arenas of aesthetics and ethics are inherently contentious; and it anticipates the concern of relativists and non-cognitivists about values (a concern roughly shared by radical defenders of the marginalized and conservatively-disposed defenders of local mores) that the idea of *the good*, implicit in the Logos, supports a cultural-political attitude that seeks to limit the natural diversity of (plausible) values arising from various modes of life and from divergent conceptions of human flourishing. Another concern is that a logo-centric, rational approach to values can never account for, and if activated is liable to dampen, the vitality (or freedom) of our aesthetic and ethical existence. These kinds of concerns gain no traction if the account we have given of the Logos is right, which is to say if the basic concepts that comprise it are (1) essentially temporal, (2) unendingly complicated in their own interrelated being, *and* (2a) owing to the creative acts and traditions through which they unfold; and they (3) only exist in free, creative individuals immersed in the affective and cognitive reality of their life-world. These features of the Logos rule out the worrisome possibility that a vision of the good represented by its implicit standards of valuation could, in principle, consistently, justify a static, life-suppressing, or total (even increasingly *complete*) conceptual scheme (or a totalitarian social arrangement), whether alien or our own. For such a scheme (or arrangement) would be at odds with the spontaneous creative rationality (sometimes called “free will”) of persons, which is both the crowning achievement and ground of the intentional-aesthetic concepts presupposed by thought, and captured by the idea of the Logos.

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ⁱ "The Nihilistic Image of the World," *Modern Horizons* (June 2017).

ⁱⁱ The word "mental" is not equivalent to the technical term "intentionality" – which refers to the *directedness* or *aboutness* of the items (e.g., beliefs, desires) of consciousness; a belief or a desire, for example, is about something or other (a real or imagined thing or content).

ⁱⁱⁱ This concern was raised at MH's 2017 conference at the University of Berkeley, by Aaron Edridge, an anthropology doctoral student at Berkeley. The concern was whether an argument I was making against cultural relativism could be used in support of different kinds of cultural imperialism.

^{iv} "The Inscrutability of Reference," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, page 239.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Benjamin Whorf advanced an early version of this view in "Science and Linguistics," *Language, Thought, and Reality*, pages 213-4.

^{vii} The corpus of Donald Davidson performs this task admirably.

^{viii} *Who Killed Homer*, page 39.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 260, page 204.

^{xi} *The Presocratics*, page 69.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, page 74.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} I have borrowed this idea from Walter Kaufmann, who uses the term "ontological interest," which he explains in the penultimate section of his *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, pages 421-29. The section is entitled "Man's Ontological Interest."

^{xv} Michael Morris clarifies and defends this claim at length in chapter 9.2 ("Is truth a value?") of his first book, *The Good and the True*. So far as I know, no philosopher has addressed the issue of truth as a value as clearly and succinctly as Morris. I asked him several years ago why he never pursued this important topic in subsequent publications, or more recently. Before his nervous program head, he indicated that he was reluctant on account of the nature of the financial (hiring) pressures placed by the UK government on the publishing record of academic departments.

^{xvi} *The Gay Science*, section 357, page 306.

^{xvii} *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, page 493.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*

^{xix} Daniel Dennett is the most well-known exponent of this approach to the basic concepts of thought (belief, free will, etc.).

^{xx} See Walter Kaufmann's footnote to section 373 of his translation of *The Gay Science*.

^{xxi} *The Gay Science*, section 344, page 382.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, page 383.

^{xxiii} *The Nicomachean Ethics*, page 5, Book One, iii.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxv} Up to now, I avoided opening a subsidiary discussion in these endnotes, but I feel that a particularly insightful comment that Andrew Bingham has made about this claim while reading an earlier copy of this paper sheds light on our broader discussion. After mentioning that the claim relates to my critique of “local truth regimes” (p. 4), he said that it perhaps also relates “to Wittgenstein’s notion of private language” in *Philosophical Investigations*. These comments are worth developing together. If the ideas of a local truth regime or a private language strain the concept of meaning toward a breaking point, or are not clearly intelligible, we might wonder if “the theories of an individual whose life experience has been largely isolated from a tradition of thought” can be placed on a continuum at an extreme end of which meaning is no longer available. Let us replace ‘largely’ with ‘completely.’ Language itself carries within its conceptual commitments an *implicit* tradition of thought, or contains the resources for an ideal speaker of a language to understand ideas that draw on its existing vocabulary. But if we could imagine a language stripped of its conceptual potential to express *readily* ethical and political thoughts, e.g., a language with an *extremely* limited intentional vocabulary, it would be hard to imagine how even a clever speaker of such a language would be able to generate theories pertaining to such intentionally rich areas of thought as ethics or politics – unless her language were buttressed with further (core intentional) vocabulary. I take Andrew’s remark to support the view that traditions are a way to buttress language and language speakers who occupy a much more advanced point on the continuum of intelligibility. This thought (of a more or less continuous spectrum of intelligibility) suggests to me that the intelligibility of inquiries or discussions heavily reliant on an intentional vocabulary will always be a matter of degree, and that *perfect intelligibility* will remain more or less out of reach in many nevertheless rich and productive inquiries, and perhaps even in inquiries marked off by distinctly modest goals.