

NIETZSCHE ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT: Philosophers before Friedrich Nietzsche are more interested in reality than in appearance; they tend to believe that we can access the ultimate truth through hard work, which will set us free. However, in his book, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche criticizes this aim of science, or metaphysics. While it has been argued that Nietzsche denies the distinction between perceivable appearances and a concealed, underlying reality, in this paper, I will argue that such a distinction is consistent with Nietzsche's project and contributes to his perspectivism.

KEYWORDS: *Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, reality, appearance*

In his book, *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes the scientific, or metaphysical, aim of understanding the better and more real world distinct from our apparent world. While it has been argued that in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche denies the distinction between perceivable appearances and a concealed, underlying reality, in this paper I will argue that such a distinction not only is consistent with Nietzsche's project but also contributes to his perspectivism.¹⁰⁶ First, I will briefly explain this distinction and why a denial of the distinction between real and appearance might seem to contribute to Nietzsche's project in *The Gay Science*. Then, I will argue that this distinction is in fact necessary for perspectivism and show that this distinction is consistent with Nietzsche's project.

One way to understand appearance is as the totality of sensory experience regarding an object. Take my notebook for example: I can see that it is blue; I can feel that it is impenetrable; and, fortunately, I can smell that it is odorless. These qualities together compose an appearance for me. However, my notebook does not appear in the same way to everybody; my hypothetical pet bat echolocates my notebook in a certain way I can never understand. Thus, appearances can vary between consciousnesses. However, my hypothetical pet bat and I still wish to say that we perceive the same notebook regardless of its different appearances. Thus, we posit a veiled objective reality of my notebook, a reality that causes or is the source of the appearance. In addition to perceptions of

¹⁰⁶ Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, "Nietzsche," in *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 97.

the object, a scientific view of this notebook's reality may involve some paper and ink molecules instead of sensory experience. These molecules, together with light and air, create the appearance of a notebook for me. Considering these different perspectives on the same object shows a profound ontological distinction between appearance and reality.

Other philosophers such as Descartes and Hegel are more interested in reality than in appearance. For example, Plato thinks that we shall study the realm of forms, the ultimate, eternal, changeless reality, instead of the appearance.¹⁰⁷ Descartes thinks that appearance, acquired through our senses, actually hinders our study of reality; we can only access the ultimate truth through reasons.¹⁰⁸ While Hegel argued for an "ultimate reality that we can come to know through pure thought processes alone."¹⁰⁹ Both believe that we can access the ultimate truth through hard work, which will set us free.

However, Nietzsche criticizes this belief, claiming that: "[your love of 'reality'] has also been worked on and woven by some fantasy, some prejudice, some irrationality, some incomprehension, some fear, and whatever else!"¹¹⁰ He believes that this love of reality is not only intrinsically unfounded but also harmful because "sickness results from dreaming of a better way of life we might achieve in the future."¹¹¹ The idea of "a better way of life" or "a better world" refers to the world on which realists focus. Although the curiosity for reality is natural and prevalent, Nietzsche believes that it nevertheless causes us sickness. He criticizes this "hopeless curiosity" and focuses on the appearance by claiming that: "appearance is, for me, what is itself at work and alive."¹¹² For this paper, I will not delve deeper into Nietzsche's reasonings against the study of reality. Instead, I wish to answer whether Nietzsche denies the distinction between reality and appearance.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Kraut, "Plato," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition).

¹⁰⁸ Gary Hatfield, "René Descartes," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition).

¹⁰⁹ Paul Redding, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2020 Edition).

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Richard Polt, in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, ed. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), section 57.

¹¹¹ Guignon and Derk, 98.

¹¹² Nietzsche, sec. 374, 54.

Nietzsche's project seems to deny the distinction of appearance and reality as a presupposition for the main subject of his criticism. According to Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, "the dualistic opposition between appearance and reality paves the way for a particular conception of our task as humans."¹¹³ The particular conception of our task refers to the study of the realists, which Nietzsche criticizes. According to this view, if we do not posit a reality behind the appearance, it would be impossible for us to mistake and aim for the reality. Because Nietzsche criticizes 'the task,' he might also criticize what 'paves the way.' However, I argue that Nietzsche does not deny the distinction between reality and appearance.

Nietzsche writes that "we cannot see around our own corner,"¹¹⁴ a statement whose meaning, I believe, is twofold. On one hand, human and non-human beings perceive differently due to their different faculties. On the other, human beings interpret apprehension with a unique human value. This paper focuses on the latter. For example, we tend to interpret the world anthropomorphically: gods can have human characteristics; a painting can be "beautiful;" in philosophy, we describe certain puzzling reasonings as "benign" but others as "vicious." Nietzsche argues that the characteristics we impose on the world are not characteristic of the world: "the overall character of the world is, for all eternity, chaos...in the sense that it lacks order, articulation, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms might say."¹¹⁵

An example of this might be that a particular painting might seem beautiful to me, yet Nietzsche would argue that my way of interpretation provides the painting its beauty. Without my interpretation, the painting is just a chaotic pile of colorful molecules lacking any human-imposed characteristics. A distinction between appearance and reality arises from this argument: we experience our values because we have applied them to something, and if we cannot apply them to

¹¹³ Guignon and Derk, 98.

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, sec. 374.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., sec. 109.

reality, we must apply them to appearances. If the distinction is denied that we only encounter a one-layer world, we must posit our values to that layer, and there will be no place left for the real chaotic world.

One possible objection to the necessity of the distinction between reality and appearance might be that we do not impose our values upon appearances as apprehended. Rather, we impose our values upon appearances as interpreted. Direct perception does not come value-laden. Thus, Nietzsche should abandon the distinction between reality and appearance for its redundancy. For example, when I perceive a painting, it is only a collection of shapes and colors. However, once I interpret it as a painting, I can ascribe to it human qualities such as beauty. In this example, the image, the collection of shapes and colors, is an apprehended appearance, and the interpreted painting is an interpreted appearance. Perspectivism seems to survive without a distinction between reality and appearance by substituting in two appearance levels. However, I think this dual-appearance argument necessarily leads to a dilemma. One must answer whether different consciousnesses encounter the same appearance as apprehended.

In response to this possible objection, I present two possible responses. First, one can claim that different consciousnesses do apprehend the same appearance. Because we interpret the apprehension differently, we ascribe different values to the objects. I believe this claim is problematic because it accepts the appearance as apprehended as a new name for what was conceived of previously as reality. As such, the appearance as apprehended understood in this way inherits any critique Nietzsche makes regarding reality. Furthermore, I find the claim that different consciousnesses do apprehend the same appearance untenable because (returning to my previous example) my hypothetical pet bat and I cannot apprehend the same painting; I have no knowledge of its echolocation, and it has no knowledge of my color perception. Although I focus on Anthropocentric perspectivism in this paper, Nietzsche's argument must apply to all consciousness

across species. Thus, the same apprehension across species seems incompatible with the fact that different species have different perceptive faculties.

Secondly, one can claim that different consciousnesses do not apprehend the same appearance: sense data come customized. This claim is also problematic because it requires a causal link of identity between different appearances, even though they share no underlying reality. Perspectivism is only interesting if we have different perspectives of *the same thing*. I have my perspective studying *The Gay Science* while you have your perspective studying *Beyond Good and Evil*. However, we do not attribute our disagreement to perspectives. Our perspectives matter only if we study the same book. Perspectivism requires identity, which has to be founded on a shared level of appearance or reality. Therefore, this option also fails.

One may argue that it is unnecessary to posit a reality behind two levels of appearances. There may be another level of appearance behind the second one, and so forth. It could be “turtles all the way down.”¹¹⁶ However, I argue that if there is one level of appearance which looks the same to all humans: a turtle large enough to hold all of us and our little turtles, then the existence of that colossal turtle does all the work reality does. You may call it appearance founded on other appearances; however, Nietzsche's criticism of studying reality can apply to the study of that shared appearance because it is at least two turtles down. Therefore, we can dismiss the first objection.

Another possible objection to the necessity of the distinction between reality and appearance could use a mereological argument. Since we cannot see through the appearances and there are infinitely many perspectives, how can we claim that because there exists an appearance of a building such as the Parthenon of classical Greek architecture, there is indeed a real Parthenon causing such appearances? What if the appearances of the Parthenon and the White House share the same cause in reality? Possible causes of appearances are ten a penny; what if I have a different cause of my

¹¹⁶ Thanks to Jacob Mills for this counterargument. **Editor's Note:** This phrase is used here to illustrate the infinite regress of appearances.

appearance of the Parthenon every second? I argue that these speculations might indeed be correct; however, they are not strong enough to deny a distinction between appearance and reality. They only make the already chaotic reality more chaotic, on which Nietzsche would have no objections. Reality and appearance do not need a mereological alignment to establish their causal relationship. Thus, even if we grant these possibilities, Nietzsche's distinction between appearance and reality stands.

I have demonstrated that it would not be in Nietzsche's interest to deny the distinction between appearance and reality because it undermines his perspectivism. Besides, he does not need to deny such a distinction because his critique remains consistent. One possible evidence that Guignon and Pereboom cite is Nietzsche's line that "for us, there is no 'reality'—and not for you either, you sober ones."¹¹⁷ Here Nietzsche seems to deny reality. However, I believe he means to deny a "reality" that exists without one's humanity and animality. It is not because there is nothing under "the veil" that Nietzsche criticizes the realists' fantasy of looking at the "unveiled" world; instead, Nietzsche thinks that "the veil" is already wrapped around our head and we cannot and should not attempt to unwrap it. There most likely exists something left under the veil for us to look at, whose existence does not interfere with Nietzsche's main criticism of the science. Thus, Guignon and Pereboom's interpretation on this issue is a bit too strong.

Perspectivism requires an intrinsic distinction between reality and appearance, and Nietzsche's critique of scientific, or metaphysical aims does not need to culminate in a denial of this distinction. We can remain consistent by staying within our reach of apprehension. Nietzsche criticizes only the transcendental trespassing of value assigning. Like almost everyone, Nietzsche does not wish to deny a painting can still be beautiful; however, his critique focuses on our transcendent claim that beauty resides within the reality of the painting because he argues beauty, along with other anthropomorphic virtues, has no role within the realm of reality. A sickness arises

¹¹⁷ Ibid., sec. 57.

from the goal to understand the reality, about which we should remain agnostic. Instead, we should attribute a painting's beauty to our interpretation, which is based on appearance. Thus, Nietzsche does not need to deny the distinction to criticize the aim to study reality; all he needs to do is criticize science's presumption that it can have a god's eye view from a nowhere perspective, instead of recognizing that it too is a perspective.

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