

Pietro Gori

NIETZSCHE'S PRAGMATISM

A Study on Perspectival Thought

Transl. by de Sanctis, Sarah



During his late period, Nietzsche is particularly concerned with the value that mankind attributes to truth. In dealing with that topic, Nietzsche is not primarily interested in the metaphysical disputes on truth, but rather in the effects that the "will to truth" has on the human being. In fact, he argues that the "faith in a value as such of truth" influenced Western culture and started the anthropological degeneration of the human type that characterizes European morality. To call into question the value of truth is therefore necessary, if one wants to help mankind to find her way in the labyrinth of nihilism.

In this new addition to Nietzsche scholarship, Gori explores the origin and aim of the philosopher's late perspectival thought by merging the theoretical with the historical approach, with a special focus on the epistemological debate that influenced Nietzsche. As a result, the book provides a contextual reading of the issue that supports the idea that Nietzsche's attitude in addressing the problem of truth is, in a broad sense, pragmatic.

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Introduction

In his late period, Nietzsche focused on a fundamental question of Western thought: the problem of truth, or rather of the “will to truth.” (GM III 24; KSA 5, p. 400) This question emerges from his reflections on European culture and her morality, a culture that, as Nietzsche observes, has always been animated by “the flames lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine.” (GS 344; KSA 3, p. 577) In the age of the death of God, however, this faith can no longer remain undisputed; according to Nietzsche, the time has come to put up for discussion the value of this belief and to critically examine its role as the guiding principle of human theoretical and moral orientation. The fundamental issue that Nietzsche stresses therefore concerns the very possibility of believing in that “*metaphysical faith* [...] if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie – if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie.” (GS 344; KSA 3, 577) Nietzsche focuses on this problem at the end of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. According to him, the very fact that, until today, “truth was not allowed to be a problem” was a “gap in every philosophy,” and he took on the “task” of carrying out this criticism. As Nietzsche conclusively remarks, “the value of truth is tentatively to be called into question.” (GM III 24; KSA 5, p. 401)

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche stresses the importance of this critique of the value of truth – not only for his own late thought, but also, more generally, for Western culture and its anthropology. It is possible to argue that, for Nietzsche, the question of the “will to truth” is the core of the nihilistic process of anthropological degeneration that characterizes European morality, which, according to him, is “to blame if the human type [*Typus Mensch*] never reached his *highest potential power and splendour*.” (GM Preface 6; KSA 5, p. 253) That question plays a pivotal role in the editorial and philosophical project that Nietzsche outlines in his late period. In GM III 27, he in fact announces the forthcoming publication of *The Will to Power. Attempt at a Revaluation of all Values*, and refers his readers to the section “History of European Nihilism” of that book, where “the problem of the *meaning* of the ascetic ideal” would have been “addressed more fully and seriously.” The actual development of that editorial project has been quite different from Nietzsche’s original plan, but at the end of 1888 he still considered it as completed. In his letters, Nietzsche describes the *Revaluation of all values* as the most important “task” he ever dealt with, a task which he is destined to achieve, despite the huge effort it takes. This is also expressed in the *Preface* to *Twilight of the Idols*, a book that Nietzsche writes with the specific aim of preparing his (ideal) readers to the forthcoming *Revaluation*. As known, *Twilight of the Idols* deals with the principles of the Western worldview, the “eternal idols” that Nietzsche attempts to sound out, in order to reveal their fundamental lack of content. These idols are in fact the old truths and beliefs that, since Plato, have been accepted uncritically, and to which nowadays we attribute a metaphysical value: “What the word ‘idols’ on the title page means is quite simply

what had been called truth so far. *Twilight of the Idols* – in plain language: the end of the old truth...” (EH, *Twilight of the Idols* 1; KSA 6, p. 354)

A critical approach to truth is therefore not merely a theoretical enterprise, for Nietzsche. Truth is not a matter for epistemology, solely; it rather involves the ethical, moral, even the aesthetic plane, for it rests at the basis of the whole European culture. That is why to “tentatively call into question [...] the value of truth” (GM III 24; KSA 5, p. 401) is so important. As Nietzsche argues, both the potentialities and the dangers of the Western worldview are intertwined in the notion of truth. Like a highly radioactive element, that notion has never revealed its destructive power only because no one explored it properly. Meanwhile, it slowly corroded the system it ignited, finally determining the destruction of that system itself. In other words, the collapse of “Christianity as a morality” that in GM III 27 Nietzsche announces as imminent, is the direct result of the “two-thousand-year discipline in truth-telling” that animated European culture. Nietzsche describes himself as prophet and privileged spectator of that collapse: for him, the final step will take place when “Christian truthfulness [...] will finally draw the *strongest conclusion*, that *against* itself; this will, however, happen when it asks itself, ‘*What does all will to truth mean?*’.” At that moment, concludes Nietzsche, the time will be ready for the last stage of Western culture as we know it: “That great drama in a hundred acts reserved for Europe in the next two centuries, the most terrible, most questionable drama but perhaps also the one most rich in hope...” (GM III 27; KSA 5, p. 410–1)

Nietzsche’s view on this issue, however, contains the means for a possible solution of the problem at stake. At the end of the third essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche observes that the “kernel” of the ascetic ideal that has dominated Western culture consists in “that unconditional will to truth,” in that “faith in a *metaphysical* value, a *value as such of truth*” which can be encountered in any historical realization of that ideal (GM III 24 and GM III 27). This allows Nietzsche to set the objective of his late task, but also to determine the strategy for achieving that task itself. To call into question the notion of truth, in fact, means to reflect not merely on its theoretical content, but rather on the value that one ordinarily attributes to that content. The fundamental tool to contrast the effects of European morality on the human being (BGE 203) and finally determine the “countermovement” that Nietzsche calls *revaluation of all values* (NL 1887–88, KSA 12, 11[411]), is the type of critical thinking that abandons the “moral prejudice” according to which “the truth is worth more than appearance.” (BGE 34; KSA 5, p. 53) This viewpoint is the opposite of the dogmatic conception that Nietzsche attributes to both the Platonic and the Christian view (the latter being “Platonism for the ‘people’,” BGE Preface; KSA 5, p. 12): it embraces “*perspectivism*, which is the fundamental condition of all life,” (BGE Preface; KSA 5, p. 12) and attributes value to human knowledge not as a means to access the reality of things *in themselves*, but rather as an instrument for the preservation of life. At the basis of this viewpoint we find Nietzsche’s idea of “perspectivism,” which involves a two-fold relativism about human knowledge: firstly, on the “vertical” plane we find a multiplicity of viewpoints; secondly, on the “horizontal” plane, a rel-

ative value is attributed to “truths,” for they are impermanent, they constantly change along with the conditions of experience (both physiological and cultural). Nietzsche’s rejection of the idea of “objective” knowledge (of the very notion of “knowledge,” in fact), follows from these observations on the fundamental inconsistency of the ordinary notion of truth. As known, Nietzsche defends a view of knowledge – and a moral conception consistent with that epistemology – according to which the realm of “appearances” is the only dimension within which it is possible to find (temporary) reference points for a theoretical and practical orientation.

Nietzsche’s late perspectival thought thus arises as a reaction to a well-defined cultural attitude and consists in a critique to common-sense metaphysics, that is, to the ordinary faith in “logic and the categories of reason” as if one “possessed in them the criterion of truth and *reality*.” (NL 1888, KSA 13, 14[153], my translation) In defending this anti-metaphysical view, Nietzsche is extremely consistent with some outcomes of late nineteenth-century science – the same science that in GM III 23 Nietzsche calls the “*most recent and noble manifestation*” of the ascetic ideal. This should not surprise, if one considers that, as it is now widely accepted within the Nietzsche-scholarship, Nietzsche’s perspectival thought is inspired by evolutionism as much as by post- and neo-Kantian epistemology. In order to get rid of the remnants of the old metaphysics, modern science in fact developed a new approach to the problem of human knowledge; as a result, the very notion of knowledge was reconceived, and the idea that the value of concepts and theories is merely instrumental gained new upholders. In other words, it seems to be possible to interpret the Nietzschean “death of God” in a less poetic but nevertheless sticking way, namely as a post-positivist disenchantment towards our world-description. Consequently, Nietzsche’s view could be compared with other positions following from those same principles, and whose approach to the problem of the value of truth also plays an important role in the history of Western philosophy.

The anti-metaphysical stance pertaining to late nineteenth-century culture is especially expressed by the American pragmatist movement. As William James observed (1909, p. 57), pragmatism arose from the profound transformations that took place in modern epistemology, and can therefore be considered as a reaction to the problem of meaning of scientific truth. In outlining this philosophical position, James especially focuses on the above-mentioned “vertical” relativism about truth, which, for him, follows from the “multiplication of theories” and the development of “so many geometries, so many logics, so many chemical and physical hypotheses.” (James 1909, p. 58) Consequently, James argues that in modern times the idea “that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawn upon us”; therefore, scientific concepts, laws and theories are now “treated as so much ‘conceptual shorthand,’ true so far as they are useful but no farther.” (James 1909, p. 58) It is worth noting that this view also implies the “horizontal” relativism which one encounters in Nietzsche’s perspectivism. James, in facts, agrees with the view defended by representatives of scientific instrumentalism such as

Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré, who stressed the historical and conventional character of scientific knowledge.

On this basis, it is possible to outline a viable research program aimed at comparing classic American pragmatism and Nietzsche's view. That research program would not try to make a pragmatist out of Nietzsche, but only let him dialogue with a philosophical perspective that – as happened with Nietzsche himself – has been soon simplified and misinterpreted, so that nowadays it is difficult to deal with it properly. As argued by Sergio Franzese (2009, p. 208), one should not be “deceived by the epistemological tone of pragmatism”; rather, it should be considered that “the underlying problem” that pragmatism faces “is the same [as Nietzsche's]: to get rid of metaphysics.” The Jamesian approach to the problem of truth, as much as that provided by other early pragmatists, was capable to “produce a quake which shook the foundations of our traditional ontological and moral certainties” (Franzese 2009, p. 208), thus leading to the same outcomes announced by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morality*, namely that “morality will be *destroyed* by the will to truth's becoming-conscious-of-itself.” (GM III 27; KSA 5, p. 410)

The comparison between pragmatism and perspectivism will therefore deal with several elements, starting from the framework of these views and their consequences on European culture and its philosophy. But the research must also consider the principles of both James's and Nietzsche's approaches to the problem of truth, as much as their particular aims, that each one of them developed autonomously and in an original way. A fundamental premise concerns also the way pragmatism is approached in this volume, for I will try to take a step back from contemporary interpretations and engage directly with the Jamesian conception. More precisely, I would conceive pragmatism in a broad sense, as an attitude towards the problem of the meaning of truth rather than a method to solve that problem. In other words, what interests me most is the problem itself, the very fact that pragmatists approached that problem, and how (and why) they did it. And I am interested in that because I think that it is in the approach to that problem that the compliance between pragmatism and perspectival thought can be revealed.

One of the principles of classic pragmatism (in the version developed by William James in his 1907 essay) is the rejection of the correspondence conception of truth, the intellectualist idea that “truth” means “agreement with reality.” (James 1907, p. 198–9) Accordingly to modern developments of neo-Kantianism, James also criticizes the “naïve realism” defended by common sense, which arises from an uncritical approach to knowledge. Moreover, it can be argued that pragmatism deals in a positive and fruitful way with the epistemological relativism that modern epistemology outlines. A problematic conception, for it can lead to sceptic and nihilistic results of the sort: no truth can be achieved; therefore, our activity cannot provide us with principles of orientation of any sort. But pragmatists aim precisely to avoid this conclusion and pay attention to the practical plane as the dimension where the value of logically irrelevant views can be assessed. This attitude can be found in a variety of positions belonging to the same cultural framework as Peirce's and James's. Such po-

sitions can be seen as comparable *strategies* for dealing with the same problem, which is ontological as much as epistemological insofar as it involves questions pertaining to realism vs. instrumentalism. But it also pertains to the field of ethics and morality, for truth is not a merely theoretical issue, and the way we approach the meaning of truth and knowledge strongly influences our life and practical behaviour. Among these forms of pragmatism, we find Ferdinand Schiller's humanism, Ernst Mach's empirio-criticism, and Hans Vaihinger's fictionalism – as well as, of course, Nietzsche's "perspectivism." All these authors – although each one in an original way and according to their own particular purposes – tackled the twilight of Western metaphysics and attempted to find a way out of the maze of relativism. For Nietzsche, this task is extremely important, given the consequences it has on the philosophical and anthropological plane. In his view, future philosophers are precisely "those few [...] whose eyes [are] strong and subtle enough for [...] the greatest recent event – that 'God is dead'." (GS 343; KSA 3, p. 573) These "fearless ones" will react positively to the collapse of Western metaphysics, to the obliteration of the old principles of orientation, which will be for them only the starting point of a new navigation. This is, for Nietzsche, the beginning of a renewed anthropological development of the human being, whose result will be a higher and finally healthy type of man (*Typus Mensch*).

The five chapters collected in this volume, which can be seen as five different but intertwined approaches to one fundamental problem, will deal with the various issues outlined thus far. The focus of the whole book is Nietzsche's perspectival thought, that is, Nietzsche's attitude towards philosophy that follows from his reflections on perspectivism. In dealing with this view, the framework of Nietzsche's approach to knowledge and truth will be outlined, thus determining the basis of the possible comparison between that approach and American pragmatism. What should be clear since the beginning, is that it is not my aim to argue that Nietzsche was a pragmatist, in the sense of reducing his philosophy e.g. to James's view. On the contrary, I will only try to show the "pragmatist feature" of Nietzsche's thought, a feature that, in my opinion, is far deeper and more substantial than what is ordinarily believed. Moreover, I will argue that Nietzsche's perspectivism and/or his "pragmatism" is not limited to the epistemological question – that is, to the pragmatist conception of truth as it has been traditionally (mis)interpreted by the Nietzsche-scholarship. Nietzsche's view is primarily concerned with European culture and civilization, and his attempt to put up to question the value of truth is in fact the expression of his non-nihilistic attitude toward the general crisis of Western thought, whose consequences can be assessed on both the practical and the anthropological plane.