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## Nietzsche, Trump, and the Social Practices of Valuing Truth

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Abstract: While Nietzsche offers resources for thinking about the post-truth politics of Donald Trump, this is not because Nietzsche gives up on truth but because he is prescient in realizing what is at stake in our esteem for it. Nietzsche argues that the specifically unconditional value we attribute to truth raises the spectre of nihilism. Trump is a harbinger of this nihilism because he flaunts our shared social practices of valuing truth. While Nietzsche's accounts of truth and objectivity appear to make room for Trump, Nietzsche also praises epistemic virtues—honesty, courage, curiosity, and responsibility—that Trump surely fails to express.

The slogans of social movements are often put forward as simple truths, so that advocacy has consisted in changing social conditions such that these new truth claims are accepted as true: that women's rights are human rights, that Black lives matter. Social movements critical of the political ascendance of Donald Trump, however, have been concerned not merely with this or that truth claim, but with the status—epistemological, social, and political—of truth itself. Those examining this post-truth moment have often turned to Friedrich Nietzsche, who for many is synonymous with the kind of postmodern conception of truth at the center of post-truth politics. However, while it is true that Nietzsche offers valuable resources for thinking about Trump and post-truth, this is not because Nietzsche gives up on truth but because he is prescient in realizing what is at stake in our esteem for it. Nietzsche's investigation of our pursuit of truth shows

neither that there is no truth, nor that truth is not valuable, but that the unconditional character of the value we attribute to truth raises the spectre of nihilism. Trump is a harbinger of this nihilism because he so brazenly flaunts our shared social practices of valuing truth. Since Nietzsche was so vexed by the issues concerning truth now presented by Trump, Nietzsche's responses to these issues are a vital starting point in thinking through the challenges of the present political moment. While Trump lost his bid for re-election in 2020, the election results hardly represented a damning indictment of Trumpism, and Trump, his children, or an acolyte may run in future elections. Trumpism and the issues it raises about truth are here to stay.

The argument of this paper proceeds in four parts. In part one, after defining post-truth, I question the claims underpinning common connections between Nietzsche and post-truth, namely that postmodernism brought about post-truth and that Nietzsche himself was postmodern. Although I argue that Nietzsche is not straightforwardly postmodern, his critical investigations of truth and objectivity serve as important guides to understanding the esteem for truth central to modern life. In part two, I outline Nietzsche's conception of the will to truth, especially his attention to the specifically unconditional value attributed to truth. It is because truth is valued unconditionally that Trump's apparent ability to disregard it without consequence troubles so many, raising the spectre of nihilism—the concern that our highest values are valueless. In part three, I show that while Nietzsche's positive accounts of truth and objectivity, in praising an active knower whose knowledge of the world is in part a function of her needs and values, make room for someone like Trump, Nietzsche at the same time offers standards for evaluating active knowers—the epistemic virtues of honesty, courage, curiosity, and responsibility—that, as I show in part four, Trump himself fails to live up to.

## 1. Post-Truth and Postmodernism

Definitions of post-truth abound; the Oxford English Dictionary defines post-truth, its 2016 word of the year, as, “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Word). This definition captures much of what is important about post-truth while, however, failing to recognize the extent to which post-truth politicians such as Trump, rather than abandoning truth altogether, seek instead to alter our sense of which sources of knowledge are to be trusted and so of what passes for true. To call mainstream media fake news, for instance, is to rely on the possibility of real, true news. Trump does not malign truth so much as our usual practices of acquiring and assenting to it. He achieves this through a constant barrage of lies, disinformation, and attacks on expertise that contribute to and capitalize on pervasive confusion about empirical questions. It is because of this confusion that Trump can make claims that are so baldly false according to the *status quo ante* standards of public discourse and discovery he helped to undermine. The danger in such a situation is, as Tocqueville wrote, that “no society can prosper without such common beliefs...for without common ideas, there is no common action, and without common action, men may still exist, but they will not constitute a social body” (493). So, I understand as part of post-truth a situation in which members of a social body cease to share the sort of common reality grounded in widely shared facts that could motivate, inform, and constrain social action.

To be sure, Trump is not the first president to lie, and he did not initiate the disintegration of our common reality. On the first point, it is a truism that all presidents lie. My claim is that Trump’s novelty is found in the sheer brazenness of his lies, his seeming contempt for widely shared standards of making and defending truth claims. Presidential liars before Trump did more to pledge public loyalty to widely shared standards of acquiring truth.<sup>1</sup> Trump, then, presents a

new challenge precisely because his seeming disregard for truth more acutely puts at risk our shared commitment to it. On the second point, my position is not that Trump inaugurated the disintegration of a common reality, but, again, his sheer brazenness in undercutting it marks him out for special attention.

Post-truth is often connected to postmodernism, which I define here as the view that there is no objective truth and what passes for true is wholly a function of social and historical contingencies. Connections drawn between Nietzsche, postmodernism, and post-truth often rely on two claims, both of which I argue are false. The first claim is that postmodern views of truth were a necessary condition for the development of post-truth politics. The second claim is that Nietzsche holds a postmodern view of truth. As an example of the first claim, Greg Weiner writes in *National Affairs*:

Trump is often said to have ushered in an era of post-truth politics. This is to give him more credit than he has earned. He is the culmination, not the origination, of this trend, for which the hard left, and especially the academic left, now awash in apoplexies over the president's distortions, can largely blame itself. If Trump is the first postmodern president, it is because the left has spent decades championing a postmodernism that made language an instrument of will. (80)

Importantly, the onus is on Weiner and those who make similar claims to identify postmodernism's necessary role in bringing about post-truth. Trump himself, it seems, does not read, let alone read Derrida. And we need more than vague suggestions such as MacIntyre's claim that "even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them" (141). One important point of evidence against a necessary role for postmodernism is the sheer number of elements of post-truth politics

that precede the postmodern turn in the academy during the 1960s and 1970s. While then-Trump counselor Kelly Anne Conway urged the press to judge Trump based on “what’s in his heart,” rather than, “what’s come out of his mouth” (Nelson), appealing to the character and prowess of a leader is as old as demagoguery itself. Long before Trump complained about fake news, the Nazi party railed against the *Lügenpresse*. The Hutchins Commission, formed in 1943 to study the role of a free press in a democratic society, lamented that Americans were increasingly inhabiting “different worlds of fact and judgment” (Luo). Hyvönen (40-44) counts as an additional predecessor of Trump the so-called paranoid style of American politics described by Hofstadter, who wrote of a decidedly Trumpian political environment of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (3). As these examples attest, important elements of post-truth circulated well prior to any contributions from postmodernism.

Even if it were admitted that postmodernism was a necessary condition for the development of post-truth, we can still say that those who equate post-truth and postmodernism rely on a misunderstanding of postmodernism. Criticisms such as Weiner’s take postmodern philosophers to be advocating for a certain view of truth, whereas in reality they are describing one. Postmodern philosophers have understood themselves as responding to a crisis of truth rather than creating one. The postmodern investigation of truth was “a diagnosis, not a political outcome that [Lyotard] and other postmodernist theorists agitated to bring about” (Hanlon). Critics of postmodernism have been guilty of blaming the messenger. If it were the case that truth is not objective and that what passes for true is a function only of social and historical contingencies, the proper response to a philosophical school that alerted us to this so that we might better think through our situation might be gratitude.

The second claim often relied upon by those who draw connections between Nietzsche, postmodernism, and post-truth is that Nietzsche's view of truth is a postmodern one. However, if we understand postmodernism as committed to the thesis that there is no objective truth, Nietzsche is not straightforwardly postmodern.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, it is true, is interested in truth, critical of certain conceptions of truth and objectivity, and dismissive of a great many beliefs taken to be true by his contemporaries. Nonetheless, at least by *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche clearly believes in truth, has a conception of objective truth, makes truth claims, and calls competing views false.

To be sure, there are passages in Nietzsche that can lead readers to the view that Nietzsche believes that there is no such thing as a shared reality of basic facts. Nietzsche writes, for instance, "facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations" (WLN 7[60]).<sup>3</sup> Why, then, claim that Nietzsche believes in truth? Much of the most damning material appealed to in pursuit of a postmodern Nietzsche is early and so immature, is from unpublished notebook material, or is quoted selectively. For instance, fuller presentation of the notebook aphorism just quoted offers much-needed context to Nietzsche's claim. Nietzsche writes: "Against the positivism which halts at phenomena – 'There are only facts' – I would say: no, facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact 'in itself': perhaps it's nonsensical to want to do such a thing" (WLN 7[60]). Nietzsche is responding to the positivist idea that reality offers itself to human knowers as it is in itself via unmediated vehicles called facts. His response is that there are no such facts in themselves, but that facts arise out of processes of construction or interpretation which are constitutive of experience. Heit understands this interpretation in terms of, "selection, valuation, adoption, contextualization, simplification" (46). We are active perceivers of a reality constructed out of a process constrained and informed

by our capacities, needs and values. Since to perceive is to perceive from some perspective, experience is perspectival. But this does not tell us that there is no objective reality, it tells us what objective reality is like: it is perspectival. Thus, “perspectivity does not *relativize*, it *realizes*” (Alloa).

Nietzsche is here offering a neo-Kantian view of our knowledge of the world. As Clark has argued, Nietzsche’s mature “view of truth corresponds to Kant’s view of truth about phenomenal reality” (86). Nietzsche was deeply engaged with such a position through the work of F.A. Lange, who brought Kant’s insights to bear on the progress of the natural sciences, advocating for a combination of empiricism and fallibilism that understood the results of science to be valid not absolutely, but relative to our sensory-cognitive organization. Thus, the irony of attempts to use this passage in order to condemn Nietzsche to postmodern irrationality is that in making this claim he understood himself to be contributing to the best scientifically informed philosophy of his day. Notably, the upshot of Nietzsche’s view is expressly not that everything is subjective, so not the vacuous relativism sometimes attributed to Nietzsche, since even to think in terms of subjects is to impose some interpretation on experience: The passage continues: “‘Everything is subjective,’ you say: but that it itself is an *interpretation*, for the ‘subject’ is not something given but a fiction added on, tucked behind” (WLN 7[60]).

Claims by Nietzsche that there are no facts, moreover, are greatly outnumbered by better-developed claims in the published, mature works that point in the opposite direction. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche develops an account of intellectual conscience, describing a scientific spirit who seeks a better understanding of her material situation by casting off the harmful and false interpretations of nature offered by Christianity and the philosophical tradition that arose to undergird it. Christianity is described as having “crept up to every individual under the cover of

night, fog, and ambiguity and sucked the seriousness for *true* things, the instinct for *reality* in general right out of every individual” (AC 58). The imposition of a supernatural layer of interpretation over the natural world is described as an act of, “ruthless violence to the truth” (AC 58).

For Nietzsche what Christianity triumphed over was a Greco-Roman culture about which he claimed:

All the presuppositions for a scholarly culture, all the scientific *methods* were already there, the great, incomparable art of reading well had already been established – this presupposition for the tradition of culture, for the unity of science; natural science was on the very best path, together with mathematics and mechanics, – the *factual sense*, the last and most valuable of all the senses had schools and traditions that were already centuries old! (AC 59)

Thus, it is clear that Nietzsche, rather than merely admit that there are facts and that science—which Nietzsche understood broadly to encompass the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities—can pursue them, holds such a pursuit in high esteem.

## II. Nietzsche and the Will to Truth

Nietzsche’s critical investigations of truth in *Beyond Good and Evil* and GM make clear that Nietzsche’s esteem for science cannot be motivated by a straightforward commitment to the value of truth. Nietzsche opens BGE with the questions, “*What* in us really wants ‘truth?’” and, “*why not rather* untruth?” (BGE 1). Here he is asking not about whether some claims are true and others false, but about what he terms our will to truth: the pursuit of truth motivated by the belief that truth has unconditional value. Why believe this? Nietzsche’s view is that we believe



that truth has unconditional value because that belief lends us much-needed existential security that allays concerns about the meaningfulness of human life. In order so to lend meaningfulness to life, however, truth has been conceived of as something otherworldly. Nietzsche sometimes calls this manner of valuation an expression of the ascetic ideal, the paradigmatic expression of which is the religious ascetic who denies his worldly existence, through poverty and chastity for example, in service of some otherworldly element of his being which alone is taken to have value. But this manner of valuation according to which the natural life of human beings is not itself meaningful, but only borrows significance from something otherworldly, must, for Nietzsche, result in nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism *per se* denotes a situation in which a culture's highest ideals are devalued or undermined; what is interesting to Nietzsche about modern nihilism in particular is that this devaluation has been self-inflicted, since it has been our own pursuit of what we value that has undermined that value. Nietzsche calls this the self-overcoming of ideals. For Nietzsche, our commitment to the unconditional value of truth in general has led us, through the decline of religion and the progress of science, to the discovery of the particular truth that there is nothing otherworldly. This makes it seem that we are left only with a natural world that, since it has for so long been conceived of as meaningless, is unable to ground the meaningfulness of human life, and so we are left with the nihilism that says that nothing that is, matters.

Nietzsche gives sustained attention to the will to truth's basis in an otherworldly form of valuation in *The Gay Science* 344. It is the self-conception of science that while other pursuits such as religion deal with values, science deals with facts. Nietzsche attempts to show that science, rather than value-free, is in fact merely the latest expression of the ascetic manner of valuation according to which only the otherworldly has ultimate value. Nietzsche writes:

We see that science also rests on a faith: there simply is no science “without presuppositions.” The questions whether *truth* is needed must not only have been affirmed in advance, but affirmed to such a degree that the principle, the faith, the conviction finds expression: “*Nothing* is needed *more* than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value.” (GS 344)

We pursue science because science just is the set of best methods we have developed for arriving at truth, and we pursue truth because we grant it unconditional value. Nietzsche asks after the basis of this commitment to truth. Jenkins has outlined the opaque argument of GS 344, in which Nietzsche submits that the conclusion that truth is unconditionally valuable follows from either a moral argument or a prudential one. The moral argument is that truth ought to be valued unconditionally insofar as it has intrinsic value, while other things of value to human beings have only conditional value. But, for Nietzsche, to posit intrinsic value is to engage in an otherworldly form of valuation: since the natural world is a world of change and extrinsic connection, to posit intrinsic value is to posit a source of value other than the natural world. This is why Nietzsche writes that, “those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense that is presupposed by the faith in science *thus affirm another world* than the world of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this ‘other world’—look, must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, *our world?*” (GS 344). Nietzsche, then, understands the scientific pursuit of truth as one more manifestation of the will to truth which values truth at the expense of life. This is termed a moral argument because for Nietzsche modern morality is defined by its view of moral claims as unconditional and overriding, a view which requires the existence of intrinsic value.

The prudential argument for the value of truth is that, in the long run, human beings are best served by knowing the truth about the world. Given enough time, false beliefs will yield bad consequences, and true beliefs will yield good consequences, and so if we are concerned about our own wellbeing then we ought in practice to give overriding value to truth.

It is plain to see how Nietzsche would see the moral argument for the value of truth as problematic, since it straightforwardly instantiates the otherworldly form of valuation he describes as harmful to human beings. The prudential argument, however, might seem to escape this critique since it is concerned only with how our wellbeing is affected by the extent to which our beliefs track the truth. However, Nietzsche's view is that even the prudential argument rests on moral ground. For to believe that in the long run true beliefs will best serve human interests is to believe that the world is ordered to suit human interests, that there is some agreement between human needs and the way the world is. But we would only believe that if we also believed that in some sense the world exists for us, that we are its center. As Jenkins writes, "the suggestion, of course, is that only an otherworldly faith could lead one to believe that he knows something in advance concerning the long-term benefits of true belief" (279).

We have seen that Nietzsche argues that our interest in truth is in general otherworldly. The will to truth thus denies that truth is a thing of this world. We should expect, then, that particular truth claims, though they masquerade as views from nowhere, are in fact worldly and so perspectival. To say this is just to say that they depend upon and ultimately serve some particular perspective and its attendant values and deep aspirations. One example of such a claim which will be especially important for our purposes is the physicist's claim of nature's conformity to law. Nietzsche insists that such a statement is, "no matter of fact, no 'text,' but rather only a naively humanitarian emendation and perversion of meaning with which you make

abundant concessions to the democratic instincts of the modern soul! ‘Everywhere equality before the law; nature is no different in that respect, no better off than we are’” (BGE 22). Citizens of democracies, a form of politics Nietzsche understands as achieving equality by inhibiting the flourishing of exceptional individuals, are drawn to a view of a universe of laws not through dispassionate reason, but because their interests are served by a view of reality according to which everyone and everything are equally constrained by some power.

What this particular truth claim has in common with the more general orientation to truth characterized by the will to truth is the value attached to the passivity of the knower with respect to some external authority. Just as the religious ascetic submits herself to God, the scientist submits herself to truth, and the democrat gives an account of a world where all must submit equally to laws of nature. All aspire to the passivity of being beholden to a standard that transcends them. Richardson outlines three desiderata of the view of truth Nietzsche criticizes: correspondence, detachment, and stability (247). Seeking truth has involved an ideal of correspondence to a world external to and unaffected by the activity of the knower. The ideal knower seeks only to mirror what is, and so prizes detachment from the corrupting influence of her passionate drives. Since our changeable drives are hallmarks of our naturalness, and truth has been defined in opposition to our naturalness, truth has been defined as unchanging or stable.

The premium placed on passivity marks all activity by the knower as an undesirable impediment to acquiring truth. As Page (359-60) writes, Nietzsche describes the ascetic scientist as aiming at “renunciation of all interpretation” in the pursuit of truth (GM:III 24). But, for Nietzsche, to renounce interpretation is to renounce life, since life essentially involves interpretation. Nietzsche claims that, “all happening in the organic world is an *overpowering, a becoming-lord-over*; and that, in turn, all overpowering and becoming-lord-over is a new

interpreting, an arranging by means of which the previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ must of necessity become obscured or entirely extinguished (GM:II 12).<sup>4</sup> This means that, for Nietzsche, our very conception of objective truth, since it abjures interpretation, rests on and bolsters that ascetic form of valuation according to which only the otherworldly has value, and life and all that it involves—interpretation, change—is valueless.

### III. Nietzschean Knowers, Good and Bad

My view is that Nietzsche’s account of the will to truth tells us something important about the widespread aversion to Trump and the distinctive character of outrage at his lying behavior, and that Nietzsche’s positive view offers the prospect of a more productive response to Trump.

Trump’s disregard for the truth is so galling precisely because truth plays such a prominent role in our attempts to render life meaningful. Trump represents the spectre of the nihilism that so vexed Nietzsche, the self-overcoming of ideals wherein in pursuing what we value we are threatened with the discovery that that value has been falsely attributed. If Trump can lie, and get away with it, then perhaps truth is not so valuable. But, since we have invested so much value in truth and built so much upon that valuation, to give up its value would be to give up our very way of accounting for who we are and what matters to us.

Much of the concern about Trump’s behavior is phrased in terms of the prudential argument for valuing truth discussed above. Tsipursky writes that truth in politics is important because:

citizens need to care about and know the reality of political affairs, at least in broad terms, to make wise decisions regarding which politicians and policies to support.

Otherwise, what reason do politicians have to care about serving the true interests of the

citizenry? They can simply use emotional manipulation and lies to procure and stay in power, paving the way for corruption and authoritarianism. (13)

That is, if we do not cultivate practices of appropriate esteem for truth, human wellbeing will suffer. However, as Nietzsche illustrates, to believe that human wellbeing requires that we be in possession of the truth is to believe that the world is so constituted as to serve human interests, a view which credits human beings with a providential place in nature. This is a commitment that, even if unacknowledged, has served to give meaning to existence by connecting human life to something otherworldly. Trump's ability to lie without consequence threatens this fundamental commitment.

Views such as Tsipursky's make frequent appeal to the obdurate otherness of nature when warning of the inevitable shortcomings of post-truth politics. Reality, the objection goes, is indifferent to our spin and interpretation. As one science journalist writes in *Scientific American*, "Whatever we may say or think about it, reality has the last word" (Horgan). This claim can be understood as an expression of the will to truth according to which truth is valuable insofar it puts us into touch with something outside of the everyday world of human interpretation. One piece about Trump's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic is headlined, "Trump Can't Lie His Way Out of This One" (Shapiro). Although Trump can try to massage economic statistics, or dissemble about crowd sizes, the insistent and fundamental reality of a virus and its effects are immune to spin. However, with Nietzsche, we should worry that such claims concerning the stubborn otherness of reality apart from our interpretations are a species of that more general construction of an ideal world defined in opposition to the human and carry with them the baggage of life-denying values that must issue in nihilism. Once more, Trump's lies are threatening because they put at risk a fundamental commitment that has been serving to render

life meaningful, namely that human beings who seek truth can put themselves in touch with a world other than the merely human one.

Those who are suspicious of Trump are drawn to the belief that though Trump may go far in obfuscating and lying, eventually it will be the case that, as one columnist writes, “Donald Trump's lies are beginning to catch up with him” (Simpson). We want there to be consequences for Trump for his lies because we believe everyone is constrained by the same facts. With Nietzsche, however, we should worry that our commitment to this belief is rooted not in a dispassionate interest in the truth, but in the satisfaction derived from seeing those who would make exceptions of themselves brought back into line by a system of laws to which we are all equally beholden.<sup>5</sup> Trump is active where we value passivity, interested where we value detachment. While what we want from him is to assent to the one unchanging truth, Trump brazenly offers his own truths, “alternative facts” (Bradner), while his spokesperson says about re-opening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic that, “science should not stand in the way” (Smith).

If Nietzsche is correct that we ought not to be guided by the values that underpin the will to truth and I am correct that important elements of the aversion to Trump are rooted in that will, then new grounds for that aversion should be sought. Nietzsche's positive view of truth and objectivity can help here. Recall that, for Nietzsche, the will to truth is harmful because in conceiving of truth as otherworldly and valuing truth above all else it renders us unable to see the natural world of human life as itself valuable. For Nietzsche, what is needed is a revaluation of the natural world that invests that world with the kind of meaning that could make human life matter, such that the pursuit of truth could be an expression of life affirmation rather than, as with the will to truth, negation. That is the view that Nietzsche locates in the ancients, and that he

understands himself to be reinvigorating through the account of intellectual conscience he develops in his late works:

What we have won back today with unspeakable self-overcoming (since we all still have bad instincts, Christian instincts in our bodies), a free view of reality, a cautious hand, the patience and the seriousness for the smallest things, all the *integrity* of knowledge – this had already existed! for more than two thousand years! *And*, on top of this, a good, a refined sense of tact and taste! Not as some sort of dressage of the brain! *Not* as a 'German' education with the manners of a thug! But as body, as gesture, as instinct, – in a word: as reality . . . *All of this in vain!* Turned overnight into just a memory! (AC 59)

The intellectually conscientious pursuit of truth will require that the knower revise her self-understanding. In particular, Nietzsche offers a novel account of objectivity that accounts for the contribution made by the knower to what is known and in so doing enshrines our naturalness in our pursuit of knowledge. Nietzsche envisions an objectivity, “understood not as ‘disinterested contemplation’ (which is a non-concept and absurdity), but rather as the capacity to have one’s pro and contra in one’s power, and to shift them in and out: so that one knows how to make precisely the difference in perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge” (GM:III 12). An objectivity defined in terms of disinterestedness, or passivity, requires that there be no distorting contributions from the knower, nothing of her drives or values. It is a view from outside of life and so caught up in that manner of valuation distinctive of the will to truth that sees ultimate value residing only in the otherworldly. Nietzsche’s view is that such an account of knowledge, besides being empirically dubious, is undesirable insofar as it instantiates life-denying values. Instead, Nietzsche seeks an objectivity that makes room for the activity of the knower. Nietzsche writes:



For let us guard ourselves better from now on, gentleman philosophers, against the dangerous old conceptual fabrication that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge’; let us guard ourselves against the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: here it is always demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction, in which the active and interpretative forces through which seeing first becomes seeing-something are to shut off, are to be absent; thus, what is demanded here is always an absurdity and a non-concept of an eye. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our ‘concept’ of this matter, our ‘objectivity’ be. (GM:III 12)

Objectivity remains as an ideal, but it is not the passionless mirroring of a disinterested spectator. Rather than exclude the drives and affects, objectivity must multiply and curate them. Rather than see through God’s eyes, we must see through as many human eyes as possible, from as many perspectives. Nietzsche writes of new philosophers who are to “pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and to be *able* to see with many different eyes and consciences, from a height and into every distance, from the depths into every height, from a nook into every expanse” (BGE 211). For Nietzsche, human knowledge arises out of the interested interactions of a living thing with her environment. To know an object most fully, objectively, is not to escape those perspectival interactions, but to increase their number, to harness them and to navigate the complicated interplay between them.

Nietzsche’s objectivity, then, puts us into touch with reality, but it is not reality conceived of as obdurate other. For Nietzsche, to conceive of reality in such a way is to rely on a

discredited distinction between reality and appearance, true world and illusion. Nietzsche goes so far as to describe the history of philosophy as a series of views on this pernicious distinction culminating in his own settled view. Nietzsche writes of overcoming the distinction between reality and appearance: “The true world is gone: which world is left? The illusory one, perhaps? ... But no! *we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!*” (TI “Real World”).

Nietzsche’s view is that he has undermined our prior conception of reality-as-obdurate-other by showing that it is a function of the will to truth and so chiefly a means to allay fears about the meaningfulness of existence rather than to describe that existence faithfully, and moreover a means that has had the deleterious effect of rendering the actual world valueless. However, Nietzsche insists that what is left once we abolish such a conception of the real world is not an apparent world, since to remove one pole of an opposition is to remove the opposition itself. Instead of an apparent world, there is just a new reality. Crucially, this new reality is conceptualized in the same terms as the former apparent world—so change, becoming, perspective, interpretation—but those terms are now freed from their former negative valuation rooted in the will to truth which found no value in the natural world.

We might, at this point, be concerned that Nietzsche redefines objectivity out of existence, since an objectivity that does not exclude perspective is of no use. What we want from a conception of objectivity is an argument stopper, a claim that something is true not for this or that person, but for all persons. But, for Nietzsche, to want an argument stopper is to want to be subject to some standard that transcends us, that is otherworldly, and so we ought to disabuse ourselves of any such desire. Instead, Nietzsche submits that we must come to terms with ourselves as active knowers, that is as knowers whose needs and values infuse the world they explore.

#### IV. Nietzsche Contra Trump

By way of defending Nietzsche's view, I want now to argue that it places us on a more productive footing in responding to Trump's post-truth politics. Nietzsche's view of truth and objectivity still provides reasons to be suspicious of Trump, but they are different reasons from those motivated by the will to truth. For Nietzsche, there are truths, but crediting them with unconditional value will not make life meaningful. Truth remains important in Nietzsche's positive vision, but in pursuing truth we no longer seek to extinguish the drives and their passionate, interpretive efforts. Instead, we enlist and curate them. If objectivity requires that we take on as many perspectives as we can, and perspectives have an affective basis in the drives, then the will to truth must make room for the contributions of other drives, other needs. To know more about the world is not to disappear into the passivity of a mirror, but to become more active, expansive, to contain multitudes and give more and more perspectives some measure of expression in and through us. In so doing, our pursuit of truth becomes life affirming insofar as it is an expression, rather than denial, of the values of life.

Nietzsche's positive account accepts the necessary world-making contributions of the knower and so judges the knower not on the basis of whether she is active, for she must be, but by the values that inform and structure her active knowing. Nietzsche's appeal to the values of the knower operates in two registers: first, the metatheoretical values that inform the knower's explorations of her world; second, the values instantiated in the positive vision of reality that she puts forward. In the first register, Richardson suggests that the guiding values of Nietzsche's new pursuit of truth are honesty (*Redlichkeit*) and courage (260-261). Reginster adds curiosity (456-459). The honesty Nietzsche champions is a particular kind of truth telling, that of the knower

about her pursuit of truth. Honesty requires that she recognize the perspectival character of her knowledge, and so recognize that the beliefs she takes to be true are *prima facie* expressions of her drives and interests and thus call for interrogation.<sup>6</sup> To increase the range of perspectives available to us, to bolster our objectivity, is crucially not to extirpate and deny the drives and interests of the knower, but is rather to contextualize and supplement them, even by entertaining truth candidates that put our most fundamental beliefs at risk. Courage, then, is required to pursue truth even when gaining it means losing other things of value, such as the comfort of false beliefs that serve some of our other interests. In pursuing truth, we courageously put our very selves at risk insofar as we put into play our fundamental commitments about what is true, and what has value. Nietzsche thus writes that, “the service of truth is the hardest service” (AC 50). The courageous and honest pursuit of truth is a process of risk-seeking motivated by curiosity, an interest in continually searching out, rather than having, truth. If the will to truth values truth because its possession satisfies fears about life’s meaningfulness, then curiosity is a healthier mode of pursuit insofar as it values, rather than the static satisfaction of having the truth once and for all, the open-ended process of truth-seeking: asking questions, mounting experiments, and attempting new ways of thinking and being. To these virtues I would add responsibility. Although Nietzsche is critical of received conceptions of moral responsibility, he highlights a positive account of responsibility that complements the honesty, curiosity, and courage of the healthy knower: to see oneself in one’s deeds, in what one does to change the world. We ought to, Nietzsche writes, “determine value and rank in accordance with how much and how many things one could bear and take upon himself, how *far* one could extend his responsibility” (BGE 212).

It is important to note that for Nietzsche each of these virtues—honesty, courage, curiosity, and responsibility—is good because it represents a way of engaging the world that seeks not the final and unquestioned possession of truth but instead the continued growth and development of the knower, and so stands as a life-affirming expression of the values of life—change, becoming—rather than, as with the will to truth, in opposition to those values. Recall that the risk of nihilism is that the very pursuit of what we value ultimately undermines that value, in the case of truth that the pursuit of truth undermines the value of truth. This kind of nihilism is a threat only so long as we remain incorrigibly committed to what we value (truth), and to the type of value we ascribe to it (unconditional). Nietzsche's epistemic virtues, especially courage, preach the opposite, for what is courageous is precisely the pursuit of truths that might upend us. We seek the change that truth can wrought not because truth is good, but because change is good. Change is good, moreover, because it is one of life's own values, and to live well is to affirm life, which for Nietzsche amounts to aligning oneself with the values of life. Whereas the nihilist would rather condemn reality to nothingness than re-evaluate her fundamental commitments, the Nietzschean knower seeks that very re-evaluation as a hallmark of living well.

Thus, Nietzsche's epistemological virtues allow us to evaluate the activity of the knower. But in countenancing any such active knowing, Nietzsche invites criticism from those who conceive the proper relationship to truth in terms of passivity. It is perhaps due to this insistence upon passivity that many insist that simply alerting the public to the falseness of a lie is sufficient to change minds. However, the antidote to Trump's lies is not fact-checking, not the appeal to a world of obdurate otherness in the face of which Trump should be cowed into submission. This is illustrated by the remarkable consistency in Trump's approval ratings even as he told literally thousands of lies as president.<sup>7</sup> We should rather say that the problem with Trump is not that he

lies, but that he is intellectually vicious in Nietzsche's sense. He lacks the humility of an honest knower who knows the limits and perspectival character of what she knows. He lacks the courage to question and expand the horizons of what he knows as true, a kind of greatness of spirit Nietzsche praises by asking, "how much truth can a spirit *tolerate*, how much truth is it willing to *risk*?" (EH:P 3). Trump is afraid of the truth and will sacrifice nothing for it. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, he was consistently wary of increasing testing capacity. As one journalist described Trump's view, "By testing so many people, [Trump] grouched, health care workers were 'creating trouble for the fake news to come along and say, Oh, we have more cases'" (Saletan). Trump is weak in the face of reality and cannot bear any truth that would put him at risk. Rather than courageous, Trump is a coward in the sense Nietzsche has in mind when Nietzsche writes that error, "is not blindness, error is *cowardice*" (EH:P 3). Trump is a coward not because he will not bow before reality-as-obdurate-other, but because he will not engage in the sort of virtuous activity of the knower picked out by Nietzsche as courageous and good. Trump is incapable of curiosity, and so of seeking out and seeing things from more than one perspective, namely his own impoverished sense of his short-term interests. He is incapable of taking responsibility, of recognizing and admitting mistakes, because he is unable to notice or care about how his words and actions affect others. The problem with Trump is not his perspectivism, but his anti-perspectivism: Trump is pathologically unable to admit, let alone take on and engage, any perspective but his own, and so misses so much of what is real.

Nietzsche's epistemic virtues are the first, metatheoretical register in which to evaluate Trump's active knowing. The second register concerns the world Trump would create. On Nietzschean grounds, we should not castigate Trump merely because he is an interested,

interpreting, knower, but because the world he would bring into existence through his interpretation is a bad one. Nietzsche consistently evaluates positions not chiefly according to whether they are true, but whether they are good. Nietzsche writes of Christianity, for instance, “In the end, it comes down to the *purpose* the lie is supposed to serve. The fact that 'holy' purposes are lacking in Christianity is *my* objection to its means” (AC 56). And he writes elsewhere that, “what is now decisive against Christianity is our taste~ no longer our reasons” (GS 132). Christianity is harmful to human beings quite apart from its being false. That is, that an account of the purpose and value of life is based in falsehoods is not in itself an objection to it.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we should judge it according to what sort of world it creates. Christianity is bad because it has brought into existence a world of human beings frustrated with their own natures and so, in Nietzsche’s terms, weak. And while it is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate the respects in which the world Trump offers us is a bad world, we can within a Nietzschean framework say that Trump offers a world of existential weakness, of blame, resentment and cruelty inspired by a lust for revenge that would serve to mask our underlying powerlessness to live well, which is to engage the world virtuously, and through risk to make the world into something good.

In conclusion, insofar as he insists on the irreducibly active character of human knowing, Nietzsche appears to open the door for someone like Trump. However, that is only part of the story, for Nietzsche also offers an account of what it is to know well as an active knower, a Nietzschean test that Trump surely fails. Nietzsche develops a picture of truth as something that has to be fought for and protected. Lying, in its worst form, is less epistemological error than social cowardice, an inability to engage reality, to own up to uncomfortable truths, and to take on the burden of responsibility for how one’s actions contribute to the world. Nietzsche’s account

can help a society disoriented by an unabashed indifference to truth. For Nietzsche helps us to see the truth will not set us free; instead, it is up to us to make and keep it free.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that Trump, since he at least lies openly, is preferable to the *status quo ante* of the political class preaching honesty and practicing dishonesty, that the slow and corrosive effects of past political lies is the more serious long-term threat to a shared social reality and the sort of politics that depends upon it. I think there is something to this claim and argue here only that Trump's brazenness presents a distinct and important challenge.

<sup>2</sup> On Nietzsche and postmodernism, see Gemes.

<sup>3</sup> I cite Nietzsche's texts parenthetically by abbreviated book title, book or treatise number, section title or aphorism number as appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Nietzsche (GM:III 24) writes of interpretation as, "doing violence, pressing into orderly form, abridging, omitting, padding, fabricating, falsifying," and of life as defined by, "the essential pre-eminence of the spontaneous, attacking, infringing, reinterpreting, reordering, and formative forces" (GM:II 12).

<sup>5</sup> This perhaps explains the flood of news stories in the summer of 2021 about unvaccinated Americans who fall ill from COVID-19 and subsequently express regret for not seeking a vaccine. See Bort; Soto.

<sup>6</sup> On Nietzsche on honesty and the will to truth, see Harris.

<sup>7</sup> See Markowitz.

<sup>8</sup> See Nietzsche (BGE 4).



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