Nietzsche's Fictional Realism:
A Historico-Theoretical Approach[*]

Pietro Gori – Instituto de Filosofia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Abstract: At the beginning of the twentieth century, theorists developed approaches to Nietzsche's philosophy that provided an alternative to the received view, some of them suggesting that his view of truth may be his most important and original contribution. It has further been argued that Vaihinger's fictionalism is the paradigm within which Nietzsche's view can be properly contextualized. As will be shown, this idea is both viable and fruitful for solving certain interpretive issues raised in recent Nietzsche scholarship.

Keywords: Truth, Knowledge, Instrumentalism, Fictionalism

1. A new paradigm

«I believe he is much better than his reputation suggests».[1] Hans Kleinpeter wrote this of Nietzsche in a letter to Ernst Mach dated December 22, 1911. Kleinpeter was apparently reacting to Mach's biased opinion, which likely reflected how Nietzsche was received at the time: Nietzsche, the Antichrist and immoralist who pretended to have finally gotten rid of Christian morality; Nietzsche, the philologist turned philosopher who had developed an original interpretation of the ancient Greeks; Nietzsche, the philosopher poet who wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and imagined «an overweening "superman" who – as Mach declared in *The Analysis*

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[*] Nietzsche's works are cited by abbreviation, chapter title or number (when applicable) and section number (e.g. GM III, 24). Posthumous fragments (NF) are identified with reference to the Colli/Montinari standard edition (e.g. NF 1888, 14[153]). The abbreviations used are the following: HH (*Human, All Too Human*), GS (*The Gay Science*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), GM (*On the Genealogy of Morality*). The translations used are from the Cambridge Edition of Nietzsche's writings: *The Gay Science*, Cambridge University Press 2001; *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press 2002; *Human, All Too Human*, Cambridge University Press 2005; *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press 2005; *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press 2006; *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Cambridge University Press 2003. Notes from the posthumous notebooks not available in English have been translated by the author.

[1] P. Gori (Ed.), *Drei Briefe von Hans Kleinpeter an Ernst Mach über Nietzsche,* «Nietzsche-Studien», 40, 2011, pp. 290-298

of Sensations – cannot, and I hope will not, be tolerated by his fellow men».[2] As is well known, at the beginning of the twentieth century Nietzsche's work was mostly viewed as a prominent expression of the Romantic tradition, and his words were understood in the light of that framework. It is no surprise, then, that the representatives of the newly born *scientific philosophy* (not to be confused with the later Viennese *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*, which was a by-product of this early movement)[3] were scarcely interested in him. Kleinpeter tried to argue differently, however. For him, in Nietzsche's writings (especially his notebooks) it is possible to find the seeds of the new philosophical perspective that scientific philosophy was trying to develop. Nietzsche's view of truth agrees in particular with the anti-metaphysical approach to scientific knowledge defended by authors such as E. Mach, R. Avenarius, J. Stallo and W. Clifford, as is evidenced by the impressive *semantic accordance* of Nietzsche's language with that of modern epistemologists.[4] For Kleinpeter, the *meaning* they give to notions such as "true", "false", "knowledge", etc., is in fact the same, and it reflects how they approached and interpreted the issue of human knowledge and, in particular, our scientific attempt at a world-description. Following Kuhn, we can express this view by saying that Nietzsche lived during a *paradigm shift* and, consequently, that his language reflected the new paradigm which originated in the development of Kantianism and which was strongly influenced by Darwinian evolutionism.

This is precisely what I would like to stress in this paper, for, although the most recent Nietzsche scholarship ultimately confirms Kleinpeter's intuition that Nietzsche's language was strongly influenced by modern science,[5] interpreters have scarcely considered this fact. By neglecting the importance of taking a historical approach to philosophical investigations and of engaging in contextual interpretation of Nietzsche's only apparently contradictory remarks, they continue to read Nietzsche in the light of the tradition he sought to abandon. This generates interpretive problems that can be avoided, especially concerning the meaning of notions such as "true" and "false". Thus, let us stay with Kleinpeter and attempt to see, first, what he has in mind when he argues that Nietzsche defends a new philosophical perspective and, secondly, whether this allows us to outline the paradigm within which Nietzsche's view of truth can be properly understood.

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[2] E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, Eng. transl. Dover, New York 1914, p. 25.

[3] F. Stadler, *Vom Positivismus Zur „Wissenschaftlichen Weltauffassung" Am Beispiel der Wirkungsgeschichte von Ernst Mach in Österreich von 1895 bis 1934*, Löcker, München 1982.

[4] Cf. H. Kleinpeter, *Der Phänomenalismus. Eine Naturwissenschaftliche Weltanschauung,* Barth, Leipzig, 1913. For more on this, cf. P. Gori, «Nietzsche as Phenomenalist?», in H. Heit, G. Abel, M. Brusotti (Eds.), *Nietzsches Wissenschaftsphilosophie*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2012, pp. 345-356; and P. Gori, *Nietzsche's Pragmatism. A Study on Perspectival Thought*, eng. trans. De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2019, chapter 4.

[5] Cf. e.g. T. Brobjer and G. Moore (Eds.), *Nietzsche and Science*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005; H. Heit, G. Abel, M. Brusotti (Eds.), *Nietzsches Wissenschaftsphilosophie*, cit.; C. Emden, *Nietzsche's Naturalism: Philosophy and the Life Sciences in the Nineteenth Century,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

Kleinpeter's idea of a scientific-philosophy-friendly Nietzsche is inspired by two authors: Ferdinand Schiller and Hans Vaihinger.[6] In 1911, Kleinpeter attended the fourth *International Conference of Philosophy*, which took place in Bologna. There, he had the opportunity to talk with Schiller (a great admirer of Nietzsche, according to George Stack)[7] and to hear Vaihinger's paper "The Philosophy of As If" (unfortunately, due to health issues, Vaihinger did not attend the conference personally).[8] Schiller and Vaihinger are minor representatives of a "pragmatic turn" in the history of philosophy, mostly neglected at the time but recently revaluated and discussed.[9] Put roughly, it is possible to say that they defended an *instrumental conception of knowledge* vs. *the traditional realist common-sense metaphysics.* According to them, what we believe to be *knowledge* of the external world is nothing but the elaboration of an intellectual framework (concepts) that allows us to manage that world. Consequently, it is not possible to talk of an absolute or transcendental "Truth"; that word only designates an intellectual aid which can be judged as more or less effective, depending on the aims and scope of the particular research field or practical interest within which it occurs.

The seeds planted in Bologna were quick to bear fruit. In a 1912/13 paper, Kleinpeter remarks that «the currently popularised image of Nietzsche is completely wrong»[10] and stresses the originality of Nietzsche's epistemological relativism.[11] In particular, Kleinpeter observes:

if we admit that truth cannot be reached, we are forced to hold that the human mind *operates*, therefore *thinks, with fictions*, a conclusion that Vaihinger presents in a particularly clear way in his recently published book *The Philosophy of "As If"*. The fundamental question has been posed by Nietzsche with these words: «The aim of science is to define the degrees of falsehood [*die Grade des Falschen*] and the necessity of the basic errors [*Grundirrtums*] which are conditions of life for the representing being. Not to ask the question how error [*Irrtum*] is possible, but rather: *how a kind of truth is at all possible* in spite of the fundamental untruth [*Unwahrheit*] in knowing?»[12]

That is to say, if one wants to understand what Nietzsche means when he talks of "truth", "falsehood", "error", etc., one must contextualize his observations within the fictionalist

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6 Cf. Kleinpeter's letters to Mach, 25.11.1911 and 22.12.1911, in P. Gori, *Drei Briefe von Hans Kleinpeter a Ernst Mach*, cit., pp. 294-297.

7 G. Stack, *Nietzsche's Influence on Pragmatic Humanism,* «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 20, No. 4, 1982, pp. 339-358.

8 Cf. C. Gentili, *Kant, Nietzsche und die 'Philosophie des Als-ob'*, «Nietzscheforschung» 20, 2013, pp. 103-116, p. 104-5.

9 On this, cf. e.g. K. Ceynowa, *Zwischen Pragmatismus und Fiktionalismus. Hans Vaihingers ‚Philosophie des Als Ob'*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1993, and S. Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics*, London: Continuum 2009.

10 H. Kleinpeter, *Die Erkenntnislehre Friedrich Nietzsches*, «Wissenschaftliche Rundschau» 3/1, 1912/13, pp. 5-9, p. 5.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 7. Cf. NF 1872-3, 19[156] and MA/I, 11.

12 H. Kleinpeter, *Die Erkenntnislehre Friedrich Nietzsches*, cit., p. 8. The quoted passage is NF 1881, 11[325].

paradigm, which maintains that it is not possible to conceive of "truth" in the ordinary way. "Truth" is at best a degree of *error* or *falsehood*, and knowledge is always "*Unwahr*".[13] The question to be answered is thus: is Kleinpeter right to stress this agreement? And would it be fruitful to read Nietzsche's view of truth in the light of Vaihinger's fictionalism? In order to deal with this question, we must address Vaihinger's view directly.

2. Intellectual instruments

Vaihinger is now well known within Nietzsche scholarship. Over the past decades, studies on his original development of Kantianism have been published, and attention has been paid to how he relied on Nietzsche to provide "historical confirmation" of his own view.[14] Since there is no need to explore this subject further, I would like to deal with a more theoretical issue, namely Vaihinger's instrumentalism and his anti-realism about human and scientific knowledge.

The main thesis that Vaihinger defends is that «appearance, the consciously-false, plays an enormous part in science, in world-philosophies and in life».[15] For Vaihinger, the development of modern physiology and cognitive psychology demonstrated what neo-Kantian authors such as Friedrich Lange (Vaihinger's most important reference) also argued during the nineteenth century: «Consciousness is not to be compared to a mere passive mirror, which reflects rays according to purely physical laws, but consciousness receives no external stimulus without moulding it according to its own nature. The psyche, then, is *an organic formative force*, which independently changes what has been appropriated».[16] Furthermore, «the mind is not merely appropriative» but rather «assimilative and constructive»; consequently, logical thought must be conceived as «an active appropriation of the outer world, a useful organic elaboration of the

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[13] Kleinpeter's paper continues with a paragraph clearly inspired by Vaihinger's 1911 talk, which is also published as *"Vorbemerkungen zur Einführung"* in his book. Kleinpeter especially connects Nietzsche with some conceptions that, for Vaihinger, determined the new philosophical framework, namely Wundt and Rickert's voluntarism and Mach's biological theory of knowledge (cf. C. Gentili*, Kant, Nietzsche und die 'Philosophie des Als-Ob'*, cit.; Id. *Hans Vaihinger e la proposta di un "positivismo idealistico". Nietzsche e Kant nella prospettiva del "come se"*, «Dianoia», 22, 2016, pp. 87-105; G. Gabriel, «Fiktion und Fiktionalismus. Zur Problemgeschichte des 'Als-Ob'», in M. Neuber (Ed.), *Fiktion und Fiktionalismus: Beiträge zu Hans Vaihingers 'Philosophie des Als Ob'*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, 2014, pp. 65-87).

[14] Cf. e.g. J. Schmid, «Erkenntnis durch Fiktion. Nietzsche bei Hans Vaihinger und Max Weber», in B. Himmelmann (Ed.), *Kant und Nietzsche im Wiederstreit*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2005, pp. 373-381; C. Gentili *Kant, Nietzsche und die 'Philosophie des Als-Ob'*, cit.; L. Ribeiro dos Santos, «The "Will to Appearance" or Nietzsche's Kantianism According to Hans Vaihinger», in K. Hay, L. Ribeiro dos Santos, *Nietzsche, German Idealism and its Critics*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2015, pp. 282-295.

[15] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If"*, eng. trans. Hardcourt, Brace & c., New York 1925, p. xli.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 2. On the influence of experimental psychology and neurophysiology on Vaihinger, cf. K. Ceynowa, *Zwischen Pragmatismus und Fiktionalismus,* cit., p. 27 ff.

material of sensation».[17] The intellectual products, biologically conceived as «the highest and ultimate results of organic development»,[18] are "useful" precisely insofar as they «provide us with an *instrument for finding our way about* [orientieren] *more easily in this world*».[19]

Once we admit that the intellect develops a creative activity, what can be said about the world we pretend to "know"? Is it a "true" representation of reality or a "false" one? Is it still possible to speak of "truth", "falsehood", etc.? As a convinced instrumentalist, Vaihinger argues that the whole conceptual framework must be changed, that notions such as "knowledge", "true" and "false" must at least be reconceived, if not completely abandoned, since their traditional meaning is the expression of a completely different world-conception. But this applies only to the «critical standpoint»,[20] that is, the plane where the necessity of a *false* conceptuality is accepted and one finally becomes aware of the fact that we live and work with fictions. It is to those who reach that theoretical level that the instrumental value of our concepts is uncontroversial, although the relationship between concepts and world is never denied. On the contrary, the idea that the psychical products result from a physiological modification of "external stimuli" presupposes the existence of an outer reality independent of us. Therefore, it is not contradictory, in Vaihinger's system, to be an instrumentalist about human and scientific knowledge *and* to continue to speak of "falsehood" and "falsification" – that is to say, to defend a moderate version of metaphysical realism. Fictions actually *are erroneous world-descriptions* insofar as they do not reflect the world adequately, and this follows necessarily from how our intellect functions.[21] Critical thinking aims to overcome the traditional metaphysical commitment of the common-sense world-conception, but it still has to deal with it. Therefore, ordinary language still makes sense for the new philosophers and scientists, but when attention is given to the realm of logical symbols, our entire semantic framework must be reconceived.

Let us see how Vaihinger argues for all of this. «The world of ideas is essentially an expedient of thought, an instrument for rendering action possible in the world of reality».[22] Moreover, «it is because our conceptual world is itself a *product* of the real world that it cannot be a reflection of reality. […] It can serve as an instrument within reality, by means of which the higher organisms move about. It is a symbol by means of which we orientate ourselves».[23] Therefore, for Vaihinger we are constantly engaged in an intellectual relationship with an outer world, a

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[17] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As if"*, cit. p. 2
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[21] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 159 and 62-63.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[23] *Ibid.*

realm which exists independently of us but that cannot be known accordingly. In fact, there is no "knowledge" without a subject, and the activity of this subject cannot be isolated from the properties we attribute to reality. Within the limits of our actual knowledge, we only deal with *fictions*, i.e. falsifications which help us to manage external stimuli. Consequently, Vaihinger denies «that the world as conceived by us has value as knowledge» and holds that «what is fundamental is the recognition that all the more advanced conceptual constructs are merely means for facilitating the intercourse of sentient "beings"».[24] He focuses especially on the ordinary notions of "picture" and "copy" and tries to show that, from the point of view of the philosophy of as-if, it is not possible to conceive of the logical functions as «copies of events or processes. All these concepts are not pictures of events, but are themselves events. […] The world as we conceive it is only a secondary or tertiary construction, arising in our heads through the play of the cosmic process and solely for the furtherance of this process. This conceptual world is not a *picture* of the actual world but an *instrument* for grasping and subjectively understanding that world».[25]

It is worth stressing that Vaihinger's instrumentalism does not lead to scepticism or solipsism.[26] On the contrary, he was a forerunner of recent forms of constructivism and pragmatic realism. Indeed, Vaihinger is clear about the fact that «many fundamental scientific concepts are fictional and contradictory and are not a reflection of the world of reality – a world quite inaccessible to us –», but he also argues that «this in no way renders them valueless. They are psychical constructs which not only give rise to the illusion that the world is being comprehended, but which make it possible, at the same time, for us to orientate ourselves in the realm of actuality».[27] Furthermore, Vaihinger «*insists* that [these constructs] have practical value, and we regard them as serviceable products of the logical function, as a useful device»; however, «the theory of fictions teaches us that the utility of such fictions constitutes no proof of their objective truth».[28] On this basis, a redefinition of the very notion of "truth" is required. That term cannot designate an adequate representation, since it is not possible for us to reach something of that sort. What we "know" are useful symbols made up by our intellect for pure practical aims. In other words, «so-called agreement with reality must be finally abandoned as a criterion» of truth, and «we can therefore no longer talk about "truth" at all, in the usual sense of the term».[29] According to the fictionalist viewpoint, human imperfection does not allow us either to approach objective truth

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[24] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As if"*, cit. pp. 66-67.
[25] *Ibid.,* p. 63.
[26] He in fact carefully contrasts «true criticism» to both dogmatic and sceptical approaches (*ibid.*, 162-3).
[27] *Ibid.,* p. 65.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.
[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 108 and 4.

or to discover an absolute criterion of knowledge. Given that we can only deal with a moulded reality, it must be admitted that «the world of ideas […] which we generally call "truth" is only the most expedient error, i.e. the system of ideas which enables us to act and to deal with things most rapidly, neatly, and safely».[30] Furthermore, Vaihinger observes that «the limits between truth and error are just as movable as all such limits, e.g. between cold and warm. […] *The difference between them objectively is merely one of degree*».[31]

Thus, the picture sketched by Vaihinger seems to be the following: there is a reality that is inaccessible to us; we can deal with that reality through our intellect, which is assimilative and constructive; the product of the psychological process is therefore a set of fictions, i.e. symbols or errors; these errors are means of orientation, the operational efficacy of which can only be judged relative to the particular interests involved case by case. Therefore, there is no "right" or "wrong", no "true" or "false", but only a set of intellectual errors which allow us to engage more or less fruitfully in practical activity. Once more, the focus is given to the instrumental value of the logical products, with no attention to the issues pertaining to radical metaphysical realism. Once we admit that there is a world of some sort out there and that this world acts upon us, our metaphysical need is satisfied, and we can focus on the only plane which actually interests us: that of fictions.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to accept all of this, as the history of philosophy shows. In fact, we might read post-Kantian thought as an unceasing struggle between two opposite tendencies: the common-sense belief that we can know the actual features of reality, and the critical standpoint, which tries to stress the limits of human knowledge. Vaihinger pays special attention to this and warns his readers not to make «the greatest and most important human errors [which] originate through thought-processes being taken for copies of reality itself».[32] That is to say, one must accept that the world as we conceive it «is only an auxiliary concept gradually formed by the logical function in order to take its bearings. This construction can be substituted for the actual world, and in practice we all do that; but it is not a picture of true reality, it is only a sign used in order to deal with reality, a logical expedient devised to enable us to move about and act in the real world».[33] The fundamental mistake of ordinary philosophy is therefore to misinterpret pure logical constructs as «hypotheses relating to the nature of reality», thus pretending that the psyche provides us with access to objective reality.[34] Nothing of this sort can occur! Our intellect only

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[30] *Ibid.*, p. 108. Cf. also p. 84.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 108 (my emphasis).
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

creates ideational aids that allow us to manage external stimuli. The value of these aids is merely operational, and any attempt to shift from the logical to the ontological plane – that is, to infer real, independently existing properties from a fictional world-description – is destined to fail. The way in which Vaihinger tried to «disassociate his view from rationalism or Platonism – indeed, from any view that would presume some reality to correspond to whatever the mind logically constructs»[35] – intrigued contemporary philosophers of science. Some of them focused on how Vaihinger anticipated currently debated issues and offered a viable solution to problems related to scientific realism, although he never explicitly addressed that subject itself.[36] Insofar as Vaihinger «had actually set up institutional structures to pursue a program of philosophical reform and re-valuation uncomfortably close to the project of logical positivism»,[37] which subsequently gave rise to ongoing discussions in the philosophy of science, it is possible to view him as a *pivotal figure* connecting nineteenth-century philosophy with contemporary debate. His interest in Nietzsche, whom Vaihinger considered a true upholder of his new conception, allows us to put Nietzsche into dialogue with this debate, as one scholar has recently suggested (see below, sec. 4). Surprisingly (but with good reason), this attempt is as viable as it is fruitful, and it also casts light on Nietzsche's view of truth.

3. Realism, antirealism, agnosticism

In the *Vorbemerkungen zur Einführung* published in the 1911 book (and sent to the Bologna meeting), Vaihinger declares: «When I read Nietzsche at the end of the 1890s – I kept myself away from him before that time, due to bad expositions [*falsche sekundäre Darstellungen*] of his thought – I was pleased to note a strong affinity between our views of both life and the world, which are partially inspired by the same sources: Schopenhauer and F.A. Lange».[38] This idea is echoed in Kleinpeter's 1912/13 paper: the early reception of Nietzsche's thought is criticized for

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[35] A. Fine, «Fictionalism» (1993[1]), repr. in M. Suárez (Ed.), *Fictions in Science. Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 19-36, p. 21.

[36] E.g. M. Suárez argues that «Bas Van Fraassen's constructive empiricism can be construed as a kind of fictionalism about theoretical entities» (M. Suárez, «Fictions in Scientific Practice», in Id. (Ed.), *Fictions in Science,* cit*.,* 2009, pp. 3-15, p. 3). He also observes that «Vaihinger himself was not committed to a fundamental epistemological difference between our knowledge of the observable world and that of the unobservable world. It is even questionable whether he acknowledged the antecedent distinction between observable and unobservable entities or domains of the world» (p. 5). G. Gabriel compares Vaihinger's fictionalism with anti-realist views such as Van Fraassen's, too, and pays attention to the idea of world-making, which can be encountered, e.g., in N. Goodman (G. Gabriel, *Fiktion und Fiktionalismus*, cit., pp. 65 and 80).

[37] A. Fine, *Fictionalism,* cit., p. 33. As Fine also points out, «the first use of "logical positivism" [as a synonym of "true criticism"] comes from Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"* [p. 163]» (*Ibid.,* p. 20).

[38] H. Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als ob*, Reuther & Reichard, Berlin 1911, p. xiv.

having popularized an incorrect image of him, thus discouraging scholars who were interested in theoretical questions from engaging with him. On the contrary, Vaihinger argues that Nietzsche's conception of truth and knowledge is as interesting as it is original; in fact, it was a forerunner of Vaihinger's *Philosophy of "As If"* in several respects: «Nietzsche, like Lange, emphasizes the great significance of "appearances" in all the various fields of science and life, and points out the fundamental and far-reaching function of "invention" and "falsification". […The] Kantian or, if you will, neo-Kantian origin of Nietzsche's doctrine has hitherto been completely ignored, because Nietzsche, as was to be expected from his temperament, has repeatedly and ferociously attacked Kant, whom he quite misunderstood. As if he had not also attacked Schopenhauer and Darwin, to whom he was just as much indebted!».[39] Kant, Schopenhauer, Darwin, and Lange: this, according to Vaihinger, is Nietzsche's philosophical context, out of which almost necessarily arises the idea «that "false" and "true" are "relative" concepts».[40] Neo-Kantianism – interpreted in the light of modern physiology and psychology, as Vaihinger does – indeed maintains that perception and thinking are creative processes which involve the modification of external stimuli. Therefore, what we know is not a reflection of reality at all, but rather a simplification and falsification.

Nietzsche's remark on Kantian synthetic judgements *a priori* in *Beyond Good and Evil* 11 confirms Vaihinger's idea, for Nietzsche argues that «they are false judgements» and that «without giving validity to logical fictions, without measuring reality by the purely imaginary world of the unconditioned, […] without a continual falsification of the world by number, man cannot live».[41] But the list of excerpts of this kind is long, and it leads back to Nietzsche's early writings. Focusing on the most famous and relevant passages in which Nietzsche seems to adhere to a fictional conception of truth, one can first consider *Human, All Too Human* I, 11, where he argues that our language is to be blamed if we now believe «*that truth has been found*»; that is, we think «that in language [we] possess knowledge of the world». Rather, for Nietzsche, through language we only give things *designations* and do not express «supreme knowledge of things» at all (*ibid.*). Therefore, common-sense realism is a naïve conception which cannot be defended once we reflect critically on logical thinking and finally accept that it «depends on the presupposition with which nothing in the real world corresponds» (*ibid.*).[42] This is reiterated in other passages from *Human, All Too Human* and, later, in *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche

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[39] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As if"*, cit., p. 342.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.,* p. 352. For more on this, cf. C. Gentili, *Hans Vaihinger e la proposta di un "positivismo idealistico",* cit.
[42] Reflections on this, with special attention to Vaihinger's critical standpoint, are provided in P. Gori, *On Nietzsche's Criticism Towards Common Sense Realism in Human, All Too Human I, 11*, «Philosophical Readings» IX/2, 2017, pp. 207-213.

argues that the concepts we use to describe our world are nothing but *means of making this world manageable* to us; they result from the biological evolution of the species, and our *belief* in their value as adequate access to reality only depends on their operational efficacy (see e.g. MA/I 16 and FW 110). In fact, as Nietzsche wrote years later in *The Gay Science* 354, we «simply have no organ for *knowing*, for "truth": we "know" (or believe or imagine) exactly as much as is *useful* to the human herd, to the species». Furthermore, he famously argues that «all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization and generalization»; consequently, «the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world» (*ibid.*).

This is what Nietzsche calls «perspectivism and phenomenalism» (*ibid.*): a conception of knowledge imbued by post- and neo-Kantianism, which arises precisely from the intellectual framework that both Vaihinger and Kleinpeter outline.[43] Within that context, it was commonly maintained that we are physiologically structured for *falsification*; i.e. we select and mould the stimuli we receive from the outer world, which we never reproduce adequately.[44] Therefore, Nietzsche can easily affirm that «it does not matter what philosophical standpoint you might take these days: any way you look at it, the *erroneousness* of the world we think we live in is the most certain and solid fact that our eyes can still grab hold of» (JGB 34). From this remark an important conclusion about our evaluations follows:

It is no more than a moral prejudice that the truth is worth more than appearance; in fact, it is the world's most poorly proven assumption. Let us admit this much: that life could not exist except on the basis of perspectival valuations and appearances; and if, with the virtuous enthusiasm and inanity of many philosophers, someone wanted to completely abolish the "world of appearances," – well, assuming *you* could do that, – at least there would not be any of your "truth"

left either! Actually, why do we even assume that "true" and "false" are intrinsically opposed? Isn't it enough to assume that there are levels of appearance and, as it were, lighter and darker shades and tones of appearance – different *valeurs*, to use the language of painters? Why shouldn't the world *that is relevant to us* – be a fiction? (*ibid.*)

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[43] On this, cf. P. Gori, *Nietzsche's Pragmatism,* cit., chapter 2.

[44] Eyesight is a good example in this regard (R. Grimm uses it in *Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge*, cit., p. 75): the retina filters light rays and allows us to see light only in a particular range. Therefore, we only see a portion of reality. No one can deny that the result of this process is *not* a truthful, i.e. adequate, reproduction of the external world, or, conversely, that it is a *false or erroneous representation*. But it is also worth noting that in this example, the actual features of reality are not at stake. That is, it is not possible to infer that we do not see colours *as they are in themselves*, for *there are no colours in themselves*. A colour is the result of a complex relationship: 1) between light and the object; and 2) between the light reflected by the object and an eye. Colour in and of itself does not emerge independently of that relationship.

Nietzsche's conception is quite similar to that which Vaihinger began to develop in the 1870s. For both of them, the *meaning* of ordinary notions such as "true" and "false" must be changed, and we can revaluate them within the realm of appearances, i.e. intellectual errors. But this corresponds to how the notion of truth was reconceived at the time by authors inspired by neo-Kantianism, such as Ernst Mach, and it was precisely this that interested Vaihinger and Kleinpeter. As they suggested, Nietzsche can be productively read in the light of modern science, as a true upholder of the new paradigm which was expected to play an important role in twentieth-century philosophy.[45]

This view of knowledge is well known within Nietzsche scholarship since it gave rise to an ongoing debate. The question is precisely how to interpret Nietzsche's "falsification thesis" in the light of his late obliteration of the dichotomy between the "apparent" world and the "true" world. Furthermore, issues related to Nietzsche's metaphysical commitments are involved; according to what can be called "the new received view" represented by scholars who accept M. Clark's 1990 thesis, the idea of an "erroneous" or "false" world-description can only be affirmed if one accepts metaphysical realism.[46] In what follows, I will try to argue that Nietzsche's view on truth is a mixed one, combining anti-realism, moderate realism, and agnosticism about human knowledge. *Pace* Clark, I believe that Nietzsche never abandoned his falsification thesis and that he only got rid of the true vs. apparent dichotomy for intellectual purposes. The path that he sketches in *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'true world' finally became a fable" – which is so important for Clark's argument – only leads to the critical standpoint, that is, to the idea that we work with fictions. But where do these fictions come from? To deny the very existence of an outer world is to reject the principles of the critical standpoint itself. It is because we physiologically mould the external data that we are stuck in the apparent world. It is because of this that we have no access to reality. The inference to the best explanation, in this case, is to admit the existence of a reality that is independent of us, the properties of which we can say nothing about.[47] Therefore, it is possible to say that Nietzsche defends a form of moderate metaphysical realism, although from the early to the late period he maintains that the features of

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[45] H. Kleinpeter, *Der Pragmatismus im Lichte der Machschen Erkenntnislehre*, «Wissenschaftliche Rundschau», 15. Juli 1912, pp. 405-407, p. 407.

[46] M. Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990 (cf. e.g. p. 83).

[47] Nietzsche in fact talks of an external world acting on us, as Vaihinger does. Cf. e.g. NF 1886-87, 7[54]. As Nadeem Hussain observes (against Clark), given «the kind of empirical theories of knowledge Nietzsche would have been exposed to, we can see that the fact that [the] physiological accounts [he defends] "presuppose the existence of real, independently existing, things" [M. Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, cit., p. 123] would hardly have been much of a realization. It was simply part of a standard story about how physiology and the materialistic world view undermine themselves» (N. Hussain, *Nietzsche's Positivism*, «European Journal of Philosophy» 12/3, 2004, pp. 326-368, p. 334).

our world-description do not reflect external reality.[48] In fact, he indirectly agrees with Vaihinger that common-sense rationalistic realism makes a terrible mistake. For Nietzsche,

the aberration of philosophy is that instead of seeing in logic and the categories of reason means toward the adjustment of the world for utilitarian ends (basically, toward an expedient falsification), one believed one possessed in them the criterion of truth and *reality*. The "criterion of truth" was in fact merely the *biological utility of such a system of systematic falsification*; and since a species of animal knows of nothing more important than its own preservation, one might indeed be permitted to speak here of "truth". The *naiveté* was to take an anthropocentric idiosyncrasy as the measure of things, as the rule for determining "real" and "unreal": in short, to make absolute something conditioned. (NF 1888, 14 [153])

Nietzsche's early critique of naïve realism is reaffirmed in this late note – a note that confirms that the falsification thesis is still viable for Nietzsche. Furthermore, he seems to adhere to the sort of instrumentalism defended by Vaihinger, who especially stresses that logical products are mere means of orientation. Any attempt to shift from the logical to the ontological plane is both dangerous and ill-founded given how our intellect functions. From this viewpoint, however, the very contraposition of realism and antirealism can also be overcome, and agnosticism about strong metaphysical realism can be defended. What actually disappears, once the dichotomy between the true and the apparent world is abandoned, is Nietzsche's *interest* in metaphysical speculation. *Who cares* if our world-description reproduces reality adequately or not? *Who cares* if reality has properties that are independent of us? We can have no access to that realm, and everything we know, anything of worth to us, lies within the phenomenal world.[49] Here, another parallelism with Vaihinger can be found. For him, intellectual concepts are a «*scaffolding that man has erected around reality*», which modern philosophers «have gradually *removed from above*. […] The logical function, when it has reached its goal, abdicates of its own free will; the scaffolding is cast away when its purpose has been achieved».[50] Nietzsche's anti-realism about knowledge can be interpreted accordingly. The reiterated idea that we are stuck in an *erroneous* and *false* world-image only aims to get rid of the "will to truth" which, according to Nietzsche, determined the degeneration of the human type (cf. GM, *Preface* 6 and GM III, 24-27). Once a new conception of truth is achieved, once the critical standpoint is reached and we finally accept

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[48] Nietzsche's metaphysical commitment has been explored recently by R. Sebold, *Continental Anti-Realism*, Rowman & Littlefield, London/New York 2014, chapter 5.

[49] We find this view already stated in MA/I, 9: «It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nevertheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off». But «even if the existence of such a world were never so well demonstrated, it is certain that knowledge of it would be the most useless of all knowledge».

[50] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If"*, cit., p. 69.

that truth has a merely relative value, our interest will shift to another plane, and the metaphysical question will give way to other issues, such as "*what do we do with our truths?*", or "*how can our truths influence our own development?*" (incidentally, look at what two thousand years of faith in the metaphysical value of truth has done to the human being).[51] Here is where Nietzsche's epistemology merges with his moral and anthropological concerns, something that Vaihinger's philosophy of "as if" deals with as well.

4. Fictional realism

The similarity between Nietzsche's and Vaihinger's views of truth is of some help in solving interpretative problems related to Nietzsche's metaphysical commitment. Vaihinger's approach to the true vs. false dichotomy in fact sheds light on how Nietzsche conceived of these notions, given that both authors developed their epistemological considerations starting from the same sources, thus sharing a *semantic context*. What is worth noting is that – perhaps unexpectedly – modern developments of fictionalism are even more helpful for making sense of Nietzsche's only apparently contradictory conception of truth. As Justin Remhof recently argued, it is possible to interpret Nietzsche as embracing a (to Remhof's mind consistent) scientific fictionalist view «according to which inexact representations, which are false, can also be accurate, or true».[52] I have no space to discuss Remhof's idea (which I find viable, except for the fact that he only deals with fictions as *intellectual* products and neglects the activity of *sense organs*, which plays an important role in Nietzsche and in his most influential source – F. Lange). I will only say something on the distinction between "literally true" and "true enough", which follows from the fictional approach to model theory described by P. Teller, an approach that inspired Remhof and which I also consider especially fruitful for interpreting Nietzsche's view.

Teller's recent radicalization of Vaihinger's view maintains that, by embracing fictionalism, it is possible to accept as *true* a statement which is *consciously false*. As Vaihinger observes, this can be done once truth is conceived as a degree of falsehood, that is, as not referring to an objective reality. Teller develops this idea and argues that in science, we often make use of "useful fictions" without compromising «the ways in which science provides broadly veridical accounts of the

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[51] The importance of Nietzsche's criticism of the human "will to truth" for morality has been stressed by R. Schacht, «Nietzsche and Philosophical Anthropology», in K. Ansell Pearson (Ed.), *A Companion to Nietzsche*, Blackwell, Hoboken/New Jersey, pp. 115-132. On this, cf. also P. Gori, *Nietzsche's Pragmatism*, cit., chapter 5.

[52] J. Remhof, *Scientific Fictionalism and the Problem of Inconsistency in Nietzsche*, «Journal of Nietzsche Studies» 47/2, 2016, pp. 238-246, p. 239.

world».[53] Teller's example is that of a map, which is «an accurate but not completely exact representation» of reality.[54] The representation is veridical insofar as it «succeeds in representing things as they are»[55], but it does not express an objective truth (it is not *literally true*). Rather, a veridical statement is a statement that is *true enough*, that is, a statement that *we accept as accurate* «relatively to our present needs and interests, even when it is not true precisely».[56] Therefore, Teller argues that «we need to substantially rethink how we think about truth»[57] and finally abandon the traditional view of «truth and fiction as exclusive contraries».[58] Scientific practice in fact shows that there is space for a nuanced conception which takes care of the *degree of falsehood* one can accept as a veridical world-representation. «We accept the false statement as true when no harm will be done in treating the situation as if» it were precisely as we describe it,[59] even if our description does not correspond to the actual state of affairs (think of laws in which ideal gases are taken into account). What is important is that we include the qualification "for present interests", for «different interests will require different degrees of accuracy»[60] . Yet this is perspectivism, that is, the idea that there are «lighter and darker shades and tones of appearance», and «different *valeurs*» that influence our world-representation (JGB 34). For Nietzsche, this undermines the ordinary idea «that "true" and "false" are intrinsically opposed»[61] and leads to the view that «exactness is not determined by precisely specified objects independent of our representation of them».[62] As Remhof observes, Nietzsche upholds the modern fictionalist view that «an *inexact* representation can be *accurate* insofar as the representation satisfies what we determine to be representational success»; furthermore, it is «our interests [which] partially constitute the constraints for assessing whether a representation is accurate».[63] According to this view, it is possible to take *as true* a representation the *falsehood* of which we are conscious. Insofar as it leads to productive results relative to particular interests and scopes, an inaccurate

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[53] P. Teller, «Fictions, Fictionalization, and Truth in Science», in M. Suárez (Ed.), *Fictions in Science*, cit., 2009, pp. 235-247 p. 235.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 237.
[55] *Ibid*
[56] *Ibid.,* p. 236.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 240.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 237.
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] Remhof, *Scientific Fictionalism*, cit., p. 243.
[63] *Ibid.* Remhof argues that Nietzsche is committed to *narrow fictionalism*, which «maintains that inexact representations about real entities can be approximately true, while all representations about non-existent entities are false» (Remhof, *Scientific Fictionalism*, cit., p. 239). For Suárez (*Fictions in Scientific Practice*, cit., p. 13), «the promoters of *wide fictionalism* tend toward instrumentalism [and, consequently, to antirealism] in the epistemology of science, whereas the defenders of *narrow fictionalism* are friendlier toward scientific realism».

representation is in fact a fruitful means of orientation, and within these boundaries it can be accepted as veridical, i.e. *true enough*.

I agree with Remhof that from this viewpoint, Nietzsche's criticism of the value of truth and his reiterated acceptance of the falsification thesis do not appear to be inconsistent, but I also tend to believe that a moderate form of realism should be maintained. On the basis of what has been stated in the previous section, I think it is possible to ascribe to Nietzsche what we might call *fictional realism*, that is, a view that accepts the existence of a realm that is independent of the knowing subject while holding that one cannot say anything about the actual properties of that realm. This view leads precisely to one of the fundamental theses of Nietzsche's perspectivism, namely the idea that the only "knowable" world is that of *useful* or *regulative fictions*, which are literally false but true enough to be accepted as principles of a world-description.[64]

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[64] For a commentary on Nietzsche's remark «inasmuch as the word "knowledge" has any meaning at all, the world is knowable» (NF 1886-87, 7[60]), cf. P. Gori, *Nietzsche's Pragmatism*, cit., chapter 2, § 4.